Guitarist
Issue 493
JANUARY 2023

GEAR OF THE YEAR

THE BEST GUITARS, AMPS & EFFECTS MONEY CAN BUY

ALTER BRIDGE
MARK TREMONTI & MYLES KENNEDY TALK GUITARS
PAGE 84

Featuring

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PATRICK JAMES EGGLE BLACKSTAR BOSS
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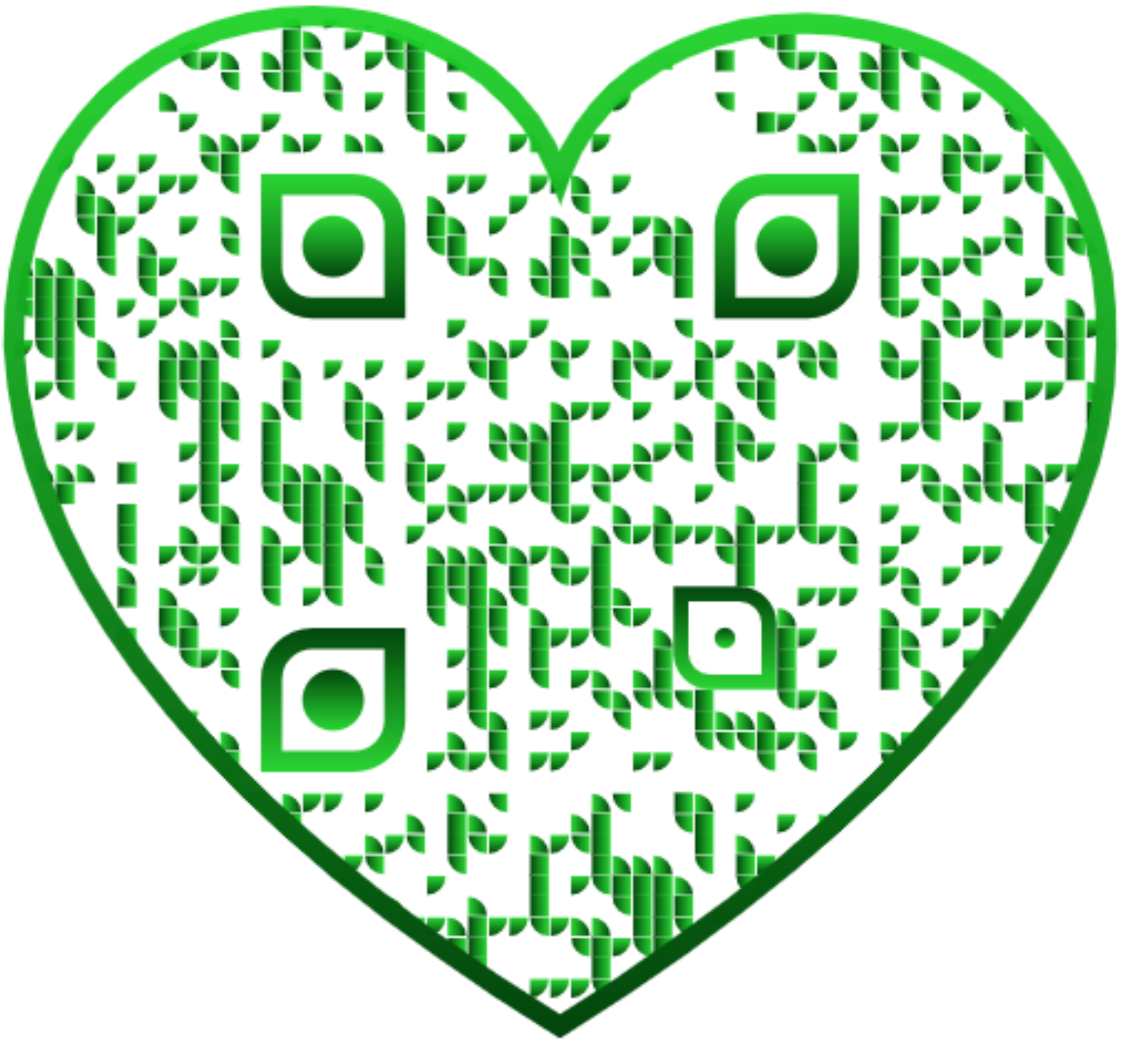

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Guitarist

ED MITCHELL
1970-2022

Life's Coda

One of the great qualities of music is that it is with us through all life's significant moments – the happy and, inevitably, the tragic, too. As we went to press with this issue, we learned the sad news that Canvey Island's most famous son Wilko Johnson had passed away. An inspiration to so many guitarists, he'd already endured and survived pancreatic cancer in 2013 against the odds –in fact, he had nearly a decade more of life to live, which he lived to the full. Look out for our full tribute to Wilko next issue.

We're sadder still to report a loss even closer to home. Longtime *Guitarist* writer and reviewer Ed Mitchell died in October, at the age of 52. He had been suffering from cancer. Ed grew up in Gourock in West Scotland and got his first job, after leaving school at the age of 16, at McCormack's – one of Glasgow's best-known guitar shops. His love affair with the instrument lasted all his life. As a writer, he seemed incapable of writing a single cliché – all his phrases were like newly minted coins, which he gleefully jammed into the pages of each review as if it were a slot machine. It was the reader who won when, as usual, his deep knowledge and insight on guitars paid out.

Aside from his work with *Guitarist*, Ed had also been an outstanding editor of *The Blues Magazine* and was a highly regarded contributor to *Classic Rock*, *Total Guitar* and *Guitar World* to name but four of the titles that were the richer for his tack-sharp writing. Characteristically, he faced serious illness with rare courage and humour. On being told he had only months to live, he told his consultant that he'd never hit a deadline yet and didn't intend to start now. He is survived by his beloved wife, Julie, and his faithful Chihuahua, Elvis. This issue of *Guitarist* is respectfully, and with love, dedicated to his memory.

Jamie Dickson **Editor-in-chief**

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Contents

ISSUE 493 JANUARY 2023

COVER PHOTOGRAPHY BY
Neil Godwin

COVER FEATURE

Gear Of The Year

52 It's that time again when we line up and celebrate the best guitars, amps and effects that money can buy – and our selection of this year's highest-scoring review gear offers up some interesting developments in both the affordable and boutique arenas

REGULARS

028.....Gas Supply
030.....Fretbuzz
032.....New Music
034.....Opinion
040.....WIN! Fender Mod Shop Guitar
042.....Substitute
044.....Feedback
106.....Subscribe
114.....Longterm Test
116.....Bought & Sold
118.....The Mod Squad
124.....Nitty Gritty
128.....Talking Loud
130.....Classic Gear
132.....Vintage Icons
138.....Next Month

FEATURES

046.....Walter Trout
052.....Gear Of The Year
078.....In My Life: Charlie Burchill
084.....Alter Bridge
108.....Blueprint: Martin Custom Shop Super Dreadnought

NEW GEAR

008.....**Blackstar** Dept. 10 AMPED 1
014.....**Chapman** ML1 Workshop Series X
020.....**Vintage** V100 Reissued w/Bigsby
022.....**Boss** DS-1W Distortion
024.....**Walrus Audio** Eons Five-State Fuzz
026.....**PRS** Robben Ford Limited Edition McCarty
092.....**Gibson** J-45 50s Faded, J-35 30s Faded & Hummingbird Faded
102.....**KittycasterFX** Tremdriver Preamp/ Harmonic Tremolo & Groovy Wizard Fuzz Driver

TECHNIQUES

134.....Blues Headlines with Richard Barrett

VIDEO & AUDIO

To enjoy all of the video and audio content in this issue, type the following link into your browser and follow the instructions in the post entitled 'Guitarist video and audio': **http://bit.ly/guitaristextra**

music radar SCAN TO GET OUR WEEKLY NEWSLETTER

BLACKSTAR DEPT. 10 AMPED 1
£439

WHAT IS IT? Highly versatile, 100-watt head that's small enough to sit on a pedalboard

One For Your Money

Following last year's release of the award-winning Dept. 10 valve pedals, Blackstar's multi-function, paperback-sized new tone machine has arrived to cover any need

Words Nick Guppy **Photography** Phil Barker

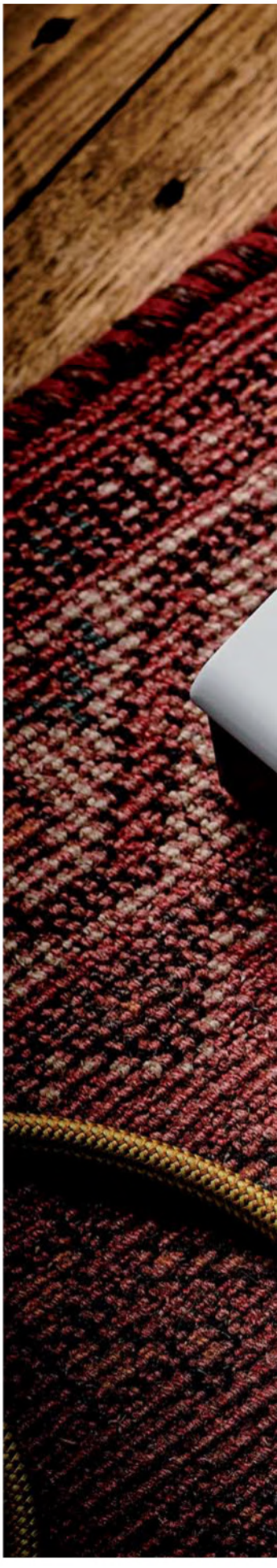
Blackstar's rise to fame as one of the world's leading guitar amplification manufacturers is well documented, and certainly one of the reasons it's arrived at the top and stayed there is that the team never seems to stop innovating. Almost every month, or so it seems, there's something new to tempt us and now it's the turn of Blackstar's Dept. 10, its 'blue sky' research and development team. Hot on the heels of last year's multi-award-winning valve Dual Drive, Dual Distortion and Boost pedals, the latest product to bear the Dept. 10 moniker is the Amped 1, a 100-watt multi-function amplifier in a package small enough to fit on your pedalboard.

Like all Blackstar products, the Amped 1 is smartly presented with clean, uncluttered cosmetics. The electronics are contained inside a tough chassis with a white enamelled aluminium faceplate and a contrasting black steel base. There's very little space inside, yet everything is neatly laid out, with mostly SMD components on high-quality printed circuit boards.

The Amped 1 is basically a single-channel design, with a choice of three preamp voices and six power amp response options. The top-facing controls are straightforward and easy to navigate, with knobs for Gain, Bass, Middle, Treble and a Master volume. There's also a level control for Amped 1's digital reverb, and a six-way rotary switch that changes the power amp response to emulate KT88, 6L6, EL34, 6V6 and EL84 output valves, with a Linear option for when you want the amplification to be transparent. There are LED indicators for all the switches, as well as an illuminated Blackstar logo.

A small three-way toggle switch selects from USA or UK preamp voicings, with a third option called Flat for use with external modelling preamps. Another three-way toggle switch selects three output levels, from one watt to 20 watts and the full-power 100-watt option.

There are two footswitches: the left one toggles the built-in reverb and also activates a cool Freeze function, while

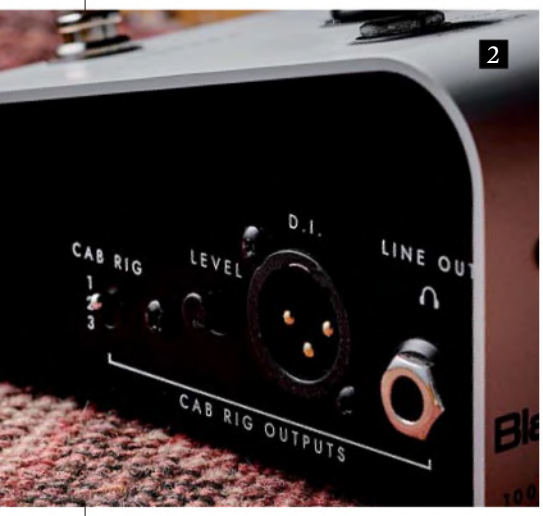


GAIN
VOICE
US
UK
FLAT
BASS
MIDDLE
TREBLE
REVERB
REVERB
POWER
1W
20W
100W
MASTER
RESPONSE
EL34
6L6
KT88
6V6
EL84
LINEAR
AMPED 1
DEPT. 10 | 100W AMP PEDAL
PRESET

1

1. The built-in digital reverb is toggled on and off by the Reverb footswitch. You can also hold this footswitch down to freeze the decay, for spacey synth-like pad effects. The Preset footswitch allows you to store and recall a saved control panel setting, so you can have semi-two-channel operation

2. The Amped 1 includes Blackstar's highly acclaimed Cab Rig dynamic speaker emulation, with three onboard memory slots from the preset switch, mono balanced and stereo line/headphones outputs. You can also record the Cab Rig emulation direct via USB



2

the right-hand switch can be used to save and recall a snapshot of the control settings. On the right-hand side of the pedal you'll find the mono XLR and stereo jack headphones/line outputs for the Amped 1's built-in Cab Rig speaker emulation, with a three-way preset selector switch and a Level control.

The busy back panel includes a switched universal mains connector, a single input jack, a USB 'C' socket for direct recording and connection to Blackstar's Architect desktop app, and an effects loop that can be configured for series or parallel operation. There's a pair of nine-volt DC outlets for powering external stompboxes up to a total current draw of 500mA, and a pair of speaker outlets for eight and 16-ohm cabinets. The Amped 1's MIDI in socket uses a space-saving 3.5mm TRS (Tip Ring Send) jack instead of the usual five-pin DIN socket, while the effects loop uses a 6.35mm TRS socket for audio send and return. Adaptors for both are included, along with a USB 'A' to 'C' lead, for desktop connection.

The other dominant feature on the rear panel is a small fan, which pulls in air to cool the internals, exiting from a perforated grille in the front, under the footswitches.

Feel & Sounds

We tried out Blackstar's Amped 1 with our usual selection of guitars, including an old Strat loaded with Duncan Alnico Pro single coils and a PAF-equipped Les Paul. Used into a 1x12 Vintage 30-loaded cabinet, the Amped 1 is practically silent at switch-on, with just the faintest whirr from the cooling fan. Some fan-equipped amps can be intrusive at low volume; the fan on the Amped 1 is so quiet it's quickly forgotten.

The USA preamp voice is low gain and high headroom, making it ideal for pedals as well as country picking and jazz, with a sweet high-end, warm bass and a gently scooped midrange. The UK voice has more gain and a punchy, dynamic midrange that evokes classic British heads from the late 1970s and early 80s. We'd class this voice as medium gain, with more than enough drive for crunch, blues and classic rock sounds. The third voice, called Flat, is intended for use with external modelling preamps. For this voice the EQ controls function in semi-parametric mode, with everything neutral at the 12 o'clock setting.

The Amped 1's virtual output valve settings will be familiar to Blackstar Silverline owners, with a choice of five

3. The rear panel is crammed with connectivity – space has been saved by using a 3.5mm TRS jack for MIDI in and a 6.35mm TRS jack for the effects loop send/return. Thankfully, adaptor leads are included so you can use all those cool features as soon as you unbox

4. There are three selectable preamp voices: low gain USA for great clean sounds, medium gain UK for crunch/lead, and a Flat option for using external preamps/modellers. A handy 'recall' LED by the gain knob helps when editing the saved onboard Preset sound

If you listed all the features of a perfect pedalboard amplifier, Amped 1 would tick every box

distinct output valve responses, including KT88, 6L6, EL34, 6V6 and EL84 options, together with a linear setting intended to work in tandem with the Flat preamp voice, for when external modellers are being used to emulate amp responses. The virtual output valves are spookily authentic, providing a progressive increase in output stage compression and distortion as you move from the bold and very dynamic Class AB KT88 setting, through to the Class A compression and chime of the EL84. To hear the output stage differences better at lower volume levels, you can reduce the Amped 1's full-on 100 watts to 20 watts or just one watt, which is still plenty loud enough for home practice but lets you crank the master volume a little more.

The digital reverb is toggled on and off by the Reverb footswitch, which can also be held down to activate a cool Freeze function, extending the reverb decay time to create synth-like pad effects.

For live use, the Amped 1 delivers its full power into either the eight or 16-ohm speaker output jacks, producing more than enough volume on the 100-watt setting to handle any gig, large or small.

We said the Amped 1 is best described as a single-channel amp, but with the exception of output power and master volume, you can store and recall your control settings into a single onboard memory slot, using the Preset footswitch. Saving a preset is a simple matter of holding down the footswitch for a couple of seconds until the LED flashes. To make editing easier, there's a handy 'recall' LED by the Gain knob that flashes when the original control value is met. Switching Preset off reverts to the sound of the current control settings, so it's possible to operate the Amped 1 as a semi-two-channel amp – for example, using a manually dialled-in rhythm sound that can be switched to a saved lead voice.

The Amped 1 also includes Blackstar's excellent Cab Rig speaker emulation, which gives you dynamic control of a virtual room environment, including room, cabinet and microphone type and positioning. The Cab Rig outputs are on the right-hand side of the unit's chassis, with a mono balanced XLR and stereo headphones/line out, together with a Level control and a three-position preset selector switch. You can also record the stereo Cab Rig output via USB, along with a non-effected preamp output and a dry guitar sound, for reamping. The Amped 1 can also receive audio from a computer for monitoring or backing-track playback.

The Cab Rig settings are accessed, edited and stored using Blackstar's Architect desktop app, which connects via a USB 'C' socket on the rear panel. Architect edits the rest of the Amped 1 controls, too, along with several hidden functions including reverb type, loop configuration and firmware updating. The app's clean, uncluttered graphics and logical layout make it very easy to use. Plugged into a DAW via USB, the Cab Rig sounds are superb, providing highly realistic room emulations that can be edited in real-time, needing little or no EQ to sit perfectly in a mix and keeping the creative process spontaneous by saving hours that might be wasted scrolling through static IRs.

It shines in the studio where the integrated Cab Rig's dynamic cabinet emulations get great recorded tones in seconds

5. You have a choice of five distinct output stage valve emulations that start off with the bold and dynamic KT88, becoming progressively more compressed and distorted as you move down the list to the EL84 setting

Verdict

If you wrote a list of all the features you'd want to see in the perfect pedalboard amplifier, Blackstar's Amped 1 would probably have every box ticked. Weighing in at just over 1kg (2.8lb) and roughly the same size as an average paperback, it's highly portable. You can use it as a standalone amp or you can not only amplify your pedalboard but also power it using the external DC outlets, provided the total current draw is under 500mA. If you have a modelling preamp, you can also use the Amped 1 as a flat-response mini PA system.

While it's great for live gigs, it really shines in the studio where the integrated Cab Rig's dynamic cabinet emulations reduce the time needed to get great recorded tones to a matter of a few seconds. Aimed at serious players at all levels, we think it's great value for money when you look at what's on offer. Whatever your equipment setup, the Amped 1's inspiring features and superb tones will open the door to all kinds of creative possibilities. G

BLACKSTAR DEPT. 10 AMPED 1

PRICE: £439
ORIGIN: China
TYPE: Analog/digital preamp, Class D power amp
OUTPUT: 100W RMS into 16 ohms or 8 ohms, switchable to 20W or 1W
DIMENSIONS: 200 (w) x 149 (d) x 81mm (h)
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 1.28/2.8
CABINET: Aluminium/steel
CHANNELS: 1, with 3 selectable voices
CONTROLS: Gain, voice select, bass, middle, treble, master volume, reverb level, output level select, power amp response select, Cab Rig select, Cab Rig level
FOOTSWITCH: 2x integral switches for reverb on/off/freeze and preset save/select
ADDITIONAL FEATURES: Built-in Cab Rig speaker emulation, 3-position virtual cab selector, balanced mono XLR out, stereo headphones/line out. 5 selectable power amp responses, plus linear, series/parallel effects loop (switched via Architect app), USB for direct recording and connection to Architect app, dual 9VDC outlets, MIDI in
OPTIONS: None
RANGE OPTIONS: None

Blackstar Amplification Ltd
01604 817817
www.blackstaramps.com

Guitarist CHOICE

9/10

PROS Good-looking, highly portable multi-function head; covers wide range of needs, both live and in the studio; super-low noise performance – ideal for home recording

CONS The reverb 'Freeze' function is cool, but we'd trade a footswitchable reverb for an effects loop in/out switch; Architect software app needs to have Amped 1 connected before it opens – an offline mode would be nice

Fiore
PLAY IN FULL BLOOM
MARK LETTIERI SIGNATURE MODEL
"All guitarists have a sound in their head – a sound that evolves and grows as they progress, discovering all of the beautiful idiosyncrasies that define their individual voice. To facilitate this process, players need a vibrant, dynamic guitar that becomes a free space in which their personality can unfold. PRS and I designed Fiore to be this guitar."
- Mark Lettieri
PRS PAUL REED SMITH GUITARS
© 2021 PRS Guitars | Photo by Hunter Selman

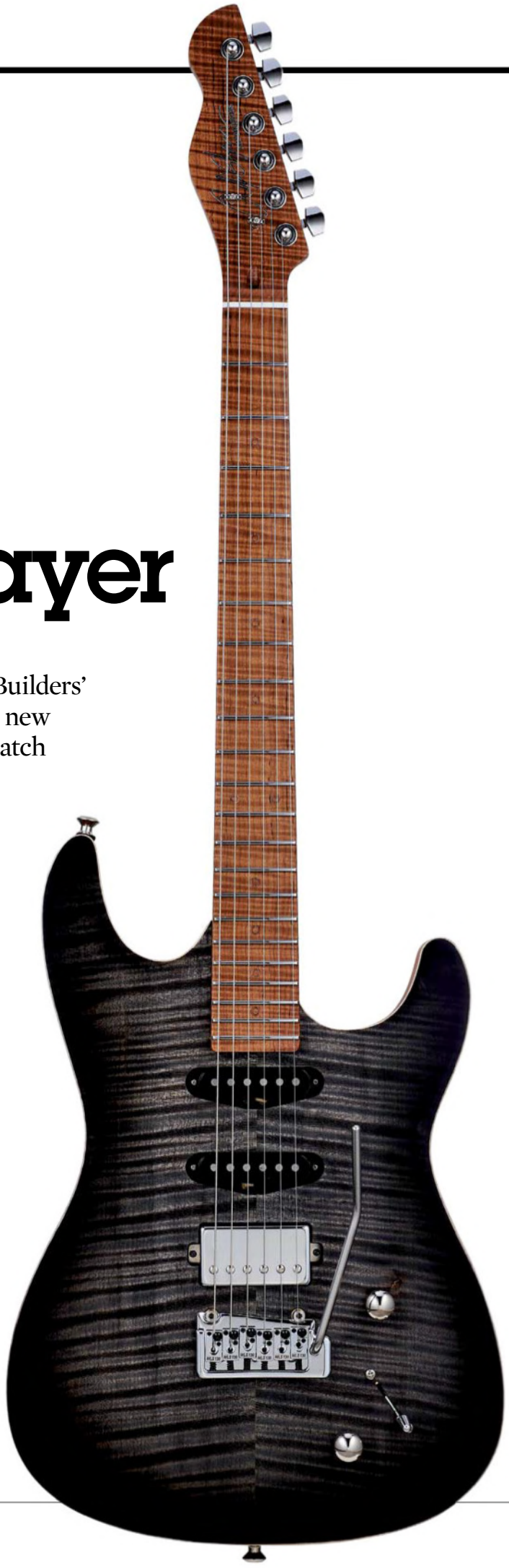
CHAPMAN ML1 WORKSHOP SERIES X
£3,499

WHAT IS IT? Boutique-level Chapman 'SuperStrat' with high-end specification and Cream T pickups, made in the UK

Team Player

Chapman is the latest brand to take advantage of York-based UK Guitar Builders' manufacturing facility to produce its new flagship model. We plug in the first batch

Words Dave Burrluck **Photography** Phil Barker



Chapman Guitars, headed by internet guitar whizz Rob Chapman (aka the 'Monkey Lord' or simply 'Chappers'), has built a solid and pretty unique place in the worldwide guitar market. Its modern-aimed, value-for-money instruments are built in Indonesia and Korea, and in many cases have been collaborative designs, spec'd by the brand's considerable online fanbase. The company celebrated its 10th anniversary in 2019, and at the tail end of 2022 has chalked up another milestone: its first UK-made guitars. In truth, the idea for these UK builds goes back a few years when a 'British Standard' range was announced at the 2018 Winter NAMM show. Unfortunately, this series never made it to market.

The ML1 was the first Chapman design, and rather than being any kind of radical reinvention of the electric guitar it uses a 'SuperStrat' platform and sweats the details. The difference here is that, aside from being made in the UK, there's no corner-cutting in terms of build or parts to meet a lower price point as with the existing Asian-made Chapman ranges.

1

2

3

1. Like all Chapman guitars, this ML1 model features a reverse headstock. The nut is perfectly cut from a 'slippery' bone and any truss-rod tweaks are easy from the open-hole access

Coined the Workshop Series, this new vision of the ML1 is basically one design with two neck options: a roasted bird's eye maple neck with a 356mm (14-inch) fingerboard radius and an 'oval C/soft D' neck profile option, or a roasted flamed maple neck with a 305mm (12-inch) fingerboard radius and an 'C shape' neck profile. The top wood can be spec'd with either flame or quilted maple, and while the neck, body back and sides are in a standard satin nitro finish, the tops can be satin or gloss and come in a pretty wide colour choice.

THE RIVALS

High-end HSS guitars? There are plenty: PRS's set-neck Studio starts at £4,399; the bolt-on Fiore, a more applicable option to the Chapman ML1, is £2,829. Tom Anderson's builds have certainly inspired the ML1 (and many others), and a 22-fret Drop Top, with a lot of custom choice, will cost over £4k. James Tyler's Japanese-made Studio Elite (approx. £2,999) is another great 'SuperStrat' with a long history. Suhr needs little introduction – guitars such as its maple-topped Standard Plus or HSH Modern Plus are at a similar price point. Then there's Fender, Charvel, Ibanez... There's no shortage of choice!

Aside from those relatively subtle differences, the ML1 has a fixed specification and is built to the same uncompromising standards of the other UKGB instruments we've evaluated such as PJD, Cream T and Seth Baccus: the craft is superb. The ML1 uses an African mahogany body, which is two-piece quarter-sawn on one of our samples, slightly rift-sawn on the other – either way, very similar. To keep the weight in check it's lightly chambered, primarily on the 'wings' and behind the vibrato. The structure is sealed by a 5mm thin maple top with a thinner walnut 'sandwich filler' that's clearly visible under the natural edge faux binding of the coloured maple top. This creates an overall thickness of 44mm. The ultra-thin finish leaves nowhere to hide in terms of craft, and the natural mahogany is left lightly open-pored, contrasting the silkier-to-the touch maple top and neck.

And what a neck it is. Just like the heavily flamed maple neck we saw on the UKGB-made Seth Baccus Shoreline, the flame maple neck here on one of our samples is equally gorgeous with a honeyed caramel hue and vivid flame that moves in the light.

2. This is the first Chapman guitar to feature Cream T pickups; this HSS set is custom-designed. "It's a bit clichéd," admits Lee Anderton, co-owner of Chapman Guitars, "but we said, 'Can we have the neck single coil to sound like John Mayer's and can we have a sympathetic humbucker at the bridge?'"

3. These open-gear Hipshot tuners boast a 18:1 ratio and are locking – important on a potentially wide-travel vibrato system like this

4. The Wilkinson vibrato combines the R Series WVPSR with the addition of the WLS130 locking saddles (as used by Suhr). It also features a steel block with deep-drilled offset holes, plus a tension-adjustable push-in-and-screw arm

"I'm a gear-hoarding nerd, so what we really wanted to do was make the guitars of our dreams…"

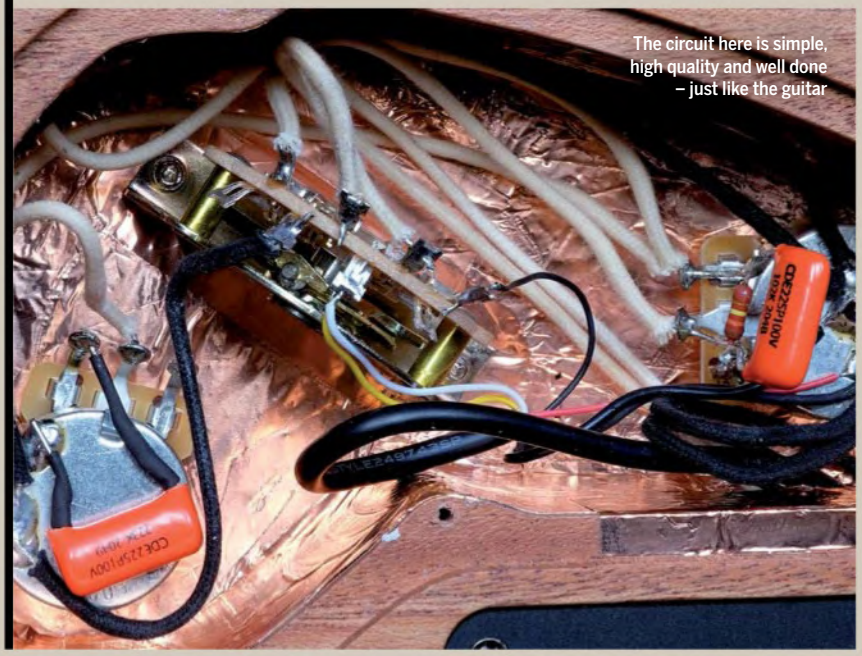
Rob Chapman

Our other slightly lighter-coloured sample looks almost painterly in comparison: the bird's eye flecks are beautiful and a perfect foil for the dappled quilt-maple glossed top. Like PJD's guitars, the neck fixings are actual bolts that screw into threaded inserts in the neck itself – rather than the usual screws of most so-called 'bolt-ons'.

The fingerboard is a separate piece of the same material and therefore doesn't actually need the walnut skunk stripe on the back; the double-action truss rod is installed from the front face of the neck and covered with the fingerboard. Another slight anomaly with the design are the 'doughnut' fingerboard face inlays that appear to be an outer circle of walnut with a maple centre. They supply little contrast, especially on the slightly darker flame maple neck, and with the guitar strapped on they virtually disappear, so it's rather handy that we have those glow-in-the-dark side dots.

If the craft appears high level then it's matched by the hardware and parts. The Chapman-spec'd Wilkinson vibrato (with

UNDER THE HOOD What's inside this hot-rod bolt-on? Let's take a look



The circuit here is simple, high quality and well done – just like the guitar

Just like other UKGB-made guitars we've evaluated, the control cavity and backplate are screened with copper foil. The pots here are CTS (500k), the volume features a treble bleed circuit (Orange Drop .001 microfarads cap and 130kohms resistor in parallel) and the tone features another Orange Drop .022 microfarads cap – all wired modern-style with cloth-covered wire. The Oak Grigsby five-way lever switch gives us the standard Strat-style selections and automatically splits the humbucker, voicing the screw coil, in position 2 (bridge and middle).

"The Chapman Carnyx HSS set features Alnico V magnets wound with 42 AWG formvar wire to attain a balanced vintage-hot output," Cream T tells us. "The bridge humbucker is a slightly hotter take on a classic PAF pickup with 53mm spacing, while the middle and neck pickups are inspired by our favourite S-style pickups, complete with modern-radius polepieces." DCRs are quoted as 9.4kohms (bridge), 6.8k (middle), 6.7k (neck).

BEHIND THE BRAND

We track Chappers down in Malta to find out what's going on with a £3.5k Chapman guitar

Your guitars are made in Indonesia and Korea and top out currently at £1,799. So a £3.5k UK-made instrument is quite a leap for your fanbase, isn't it?

Rob Chapman: "To be honest, I might own a guitar company, but I'm also a gear-hoarding nerd. So what we really wanted to do was make the guitars of our dreams... and they're expensive! We love our more affordable guitars. I play plenty of our lower-end models, but I also love to play higher-end guitars, like PRS. I think both Lee [Anderton, co-owner of Chapman Guitars] and myself thought it would be nice to offer something that was really high-end. Plus, an artist wants to play something that is really inspirational, and I guess from a purely business point of view, we hope this may attract new artists, too."

PHOTO BY XAVIER NEGREIRA

You're known for collaborating with your fanbase in designing guitars. It was different this time, wasn't it?

"Not really. The first guitar we ever made, the ML1, was a completely collaborative design. To celebrate our 10th anniversary we made the ML1 Pro 'X' and really that's what this new Workshop Series guitar is based on, so it's still HSS, a reversed headstock... the same concept, but it's made in England.

"But it isn't just collaborative design at Chapman. Some might be my designs like the Ghost Fret and the ML-3RC, and also there's the Rabea [Massaad] models. They have sold really well, so I think there has to be room for both."

Some might pigeonhole Chapman guitars into 'progressive' and 'modern' categories, but this new guitar is an old-school 'SuperStrat'.

"I think some of that came about because for a certain time Rabea and myself were playing in Dorje and that was progressive hard-rock and we all played Chapman guitars. But, to be honest, I'm Peter Green and Jimi Hendrix. My band Clockwork Wolf & Co is all about old-school Americana, the three Kings, and Lee and Pete [Danish Pete] Honoré are pretty similar."

What's the reasoning behind the reverse headstocks on your guitars?

"I do a lot of really low dropped tuning stuff and in my experience when you reverse the headstock you get a lot less 'nut ring'. The strings from the nut to the tuners are predominantly bass strings, not the treble strings, and it's the treble strings that vibrate sympathetically with the guitar and give you that nut ring resonance. So when you reverse the headstock, and you're playing a really heavy chunky drop-tuned rhythm, you don't get anything like as much nut ring on the recording. But the other thing is that it does feel different on the lower strings, again for dropped tuning: it's a feel thing. It doesn't make any difference to the sound, but it does feel a little tighter and holds tuning a little better."

How does your designer Dave Hollingworth fit into the picture?

"It really depends on what the product is. There have been times when I've had the concept and basically said, 'Dave, just make this,' and he says okay and then comes back with a whole bunch of 3D CAD drawings. It's my role and responsibility to sign off on all products; Dave's responsibility is to create the product that people ask for, unless it's an artist guitar. So, really, Dave has all the power – and should have – because he's a bassist and a lovely guy. He's also a world-class [recording] engineer and producer, he really knows about sound. Everything Djore released was engineered by Dave. So although it's my name on the headstock, and Lee and I own the company, it is a bit more than that. We have a WhatsApp group with Dave and Pete and Bea [Rabea], and we always chat about things that we think might be cool to play, or 'Wouldn't it be great if we had one of these?' It's like a big club of people that end up making guitars."

Speaking of which, how did you discover UK Guitar Builders?

"That was 100 per cent Lee. He told me about what they'd done with PJD and that Seth Baccus was involved, which I thought was pretty cool. It was also about finding a workshop that was flexible enough to make necks with a different kind of feel – and we really had to rein it in with just two neck profiles [laughs]. I was going to go with a V or a soft U. But no, you've got to take it easy. This is just the beginning." **[DB]**

5. This offset and lightly chamfered heel follows typical Chapman style. The difference is that, like PJD guitars, those are proper bolts – not screws – that hold the neck to the body

6. HSS pickups can be wired in numerous ways, but the drive here is very simple, including master volume and tone controls and the usual selections from the five-way switch

5

a lengthy WVP130 'R' 'CG' name) is based on the R Series WVPSR with the addition of the very well-received WLS130 locking saddles (as used by Suhr). The steel block has staggered, deep-drilled holes and the 'Wave 2' pivot. Then we have a push-in-and-screw arm with tension adjustment. It's a finely conceived and well-engineered system that includes a slippery bone nut and Hipshot Grip-Lock open tuners.

The pickups are custom designed for this guitar by the UK's Cream T, paired with a straightforward drive from the five-way lever switch and master volume and tone controls (see Under The Hood on the previous page).

Feel & Sounds

Despite the gloss top of our quilted-front review sample, the ML1 feels almost unfinished. The silky feel of the neck back feels superb in the hand, meaning the guitar doesn't get in the way of the important bit: your playing. Both our review samples are set pretty low. Our quilt-top model has virtually zero relief and a string height of just over 1mm on the treble side, 1.27mm on the bass side. There's a touch more relief on the flame-top sample, which slightly raises the action height to 1.27mm on the treble side and 1.5mm on the bass. And while the 'oval C/soft D' profile feels to have a fuller shoulder than the 'soft C' profile, the widths and depths are very close: the 'oval C/soft D'

6

neck is slightly wider at the nut at 42.36mm and 52.5mm by the 12th compared to the 42.1mm nut/52mm at the 12th width of the 'soft C'. In terms of depth, both measure 21.65mm at the 1st fret; the 'soft C' neck is slightly fuller by the 12th fret at 23.2mm and the 'oval C/soft D' measures 22.6mm.

The difference between the fingerboard radiuses is really minimal, while the fret gauge is pretty big (measuring 2.76mm wide and 1.4mm high), making it great for easy bends, hammer-ons and pull-offs. The stainless-steel fretwire is super smooth, too, and, put simply, both are excellent players, with nice incurving fretboards sides that have quite heavily rolled edges.

Despite the locking saddles and tuners and a superbly cut nut, the reverse headstock brings its own subtle spin – and don't forget you need to stretch your strings behind the nut, too, not least that long 'dead' string on the low E, to get things 100 per cent in tune. Mind you, is any vibrato '100 per cent' in tune? That's a discussion for another day. We'll just say that these are beautifully in-tune guitars.

Rather like the roosty, woody vibe of the all-stain finished sample we have to evaluate, the sounds are a perfect match. To be honest, this could just feature the neck and bridge with a three-way switch for many players. The woody sparkle of the neck single coil covers so much ground and it's perfectly contrasted by the bridge,

The ML1 has a fixed spec and is built to UKGB's uncompromising standards – superb

which sounds like a slightly overwound PAF with a bit of kick, a little rounding of the highs. Of course, we also have some deliciously funky (and hum-cancelling) mixes with a strong mid-placed single coil that has a little grunt to it compared with the neck. Some players might miss some wiring tricks, but, really, we're not sure you'd want to mess with sounds as strong as these.

Verdict

After a false start a couple of years back, Chapman's first UK-made guitar is well considered, beautifully crafted, feels superb and sounds it, too. Currently, there are limited options, but this is the first run and no doubt we'll see more. It's not really bringing anything new to the table in terms of design – and could be seen as an homage to the likes of Tom Anderson's long-running and pioneering style – but it feels so familiar and comfortable, that's hardly a criticism. With such a strong beginning we can only predict good things for the future of what is simply great guitar craft. G

CHAPMAN ML1 WORKSHOP SERIES X

PRICE: £3,499 (inc case)
ORIGIN: UK
TYPE: Double-cutaway, lightly chambered electric guitar
BODY: African mahogany (chambered) back w/ walnut pin-stripe, 5mm thick flame maple 'drop' top
NECK: Roasted flame maple, 'C shape', profile, bolt-on
SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5")
NUT/WIDTH: Bone/42.1mm
FINGERBOARD: Roasted flame maple, small 'doughnut' inlays, 305 (12") radius, glow-in the-dark side dots
FRETS: 22, jumbo stainless steel (Jescar)
HARDWARE: 'Bespoke for Chapman' Wilkinson WVP130 'R' 'CG' vibrato with steel block and steel locking saddles; Hipshot Grip-Lock 18:1 ratio locking tuners – nickel-plated
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 53.5mm
ELECTRICS: Chapman Carnyx (by Cream T) HSS set, 5-way lever pickup selector switch, master volume and tone
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.33/7.33
OPTIONS: Roasted bird's eye maple neck with 'oval C/ soft D' profile and 356mm (14") radius fingerboard. Flame or quilted maple drop top
RANGE OPTIONS: No
LEFT HANDERS: No
FINISH: Satin nitro to neck and body (back and sides), satin or gloss nitro to top

Chapman Guitars Ltd
www.chapmanguitars.co.uk

Guitarist CHOICE

9/10

PROS Excellent build; exceptional wood choice; neck shape options; excellent 'hot vintage' pickups; hardware; fast setup and playability

CONS Those fingerboard face inlays lack contrast ; big leap in price for Chapman

VINTAGE V100 REISSUED W/BIGSBY
£699

WHAT IS IT? Solidbody single-cut with familiar outline, Bigsby vibrato and Wilkinson 'buckers

Design For Life

This well-appointed single-cut from Vintage might just give the big boys a run for their money

Words Dave Burrluck **Photography** Phil Barker

Many players turn their noses up at cheapo lookalikes and, to be honest, we might be accused of that, too. Vintage's long-running V100 rips off Gibson style in unashamed fashion, but in a hugely competitive and over-stocked market it shows no signs of being retired. In 2022, for example, Vintage released not only this Bigsby-equipped, flame-topped version in a trio of colours but also the V100M – what we would call a 'Deluxe' – with rather fashionable mini-humbuckers and a threesome in the colour department.

Yet what the V100 lacks in originality is compensated by some really rather good-for-the-money craft. It's certainly a long way from a boat anchor-weighted guitar-shaped object: it weighs in at 3.88kg (8.54lb) and appears to be fully solid, not weight relieved. A quick strum reveals not only a sample that's been well set up but, more importantly, a lively, vibrant response. It's a good start.

As with any inspired-by design, boutique or budget, the necessary changes to the outline can be surprisingly practical and stylish, and the way that upper shoulder slightly leans into the neck and flows into the more pointed treble horn, with its offset heel joint, is just that. The headstock tip does always look a bit square to us, and the silk-screed Vintage logo isn't quite as classy as it could be, but aside from some rather over-chunky straplocks, we're struggling to find things we don't like.

For example, the mahogany viewed in the neck pickup cavity looks like it's a reasonable quality, and the tongue of the neck extends into the pickup rout, nearly to full width, too. The top is clearly maple with that figured veneer on top – just as PRS, for example, make its SEs. The fingerboard is pretty clean, the frets feel wide and low (though could do with a little more polishing), and the neck is what we'd call a pretty full 'C', a good medium-sized handful.

Plugged in, we're met with a reasonably vintage-like voice at the neck with clarity and presence, and a bridge pickup that's pretty strong-sounding without being over-midrange-y. It's quite a pushy voice overall and really very well aimed if classic to hard-rock playing is your staple. A little more openness and clarity would take it down a more classic route, especially at the bridge, but along with its in-tune vibrato, this is a perfectly giggable single-cut that has plenty of modding potential, if that's your thing. Still turning your nose up? Well, you won't be after you've played one. G

1. Not too many single-cuts in this price range show off a Bigsby vibrato. The setup here with the roller saddle tune-o-matic means return-to-pitch is very good for light shimmers or even some more vigorous Neil Young-style mangling

2. The neck shape has quite a late-50s, full and rounded vibe. The nut width is 42.9mm; the neck is 21.5mm deep at the 1st fret, 25mm by the 12th

3. This long-running headstock design is easily identified by its almost straight top. The Wilkinson tuners are pretty smooth and stable in use, while that GraphTech nut is really well cut, which no doubt aids tuning stability

4. The four-conductor pickups are Wilkinson M Series MWHZ ceramic-loaded 'buckers; neither has any ID on the brass baseplate, just simple 'N' and 'B' stamps. The 50mm-spaced neck's DCR is 7.34kohms; the 52mm-spaced bridge is 13.7k, indicating a thinner (43 AWG) wire gauge. The circuit is wired modern style with .022µF tone caps and unmarked 500k pots

3

4

VINTAGE V100 REISSUED W/BIGSBY

PRICE: £699
ORIGIN: China
TYPE: Single-cutaway solidbody electric
BODY: Mahogany with flame maple veneered maple top
NECK: Mahogany, 'soft C' profile, glued-in
SCALE LENGTH: 628mm (24.75")
NUT/WIDTH: Graph Tech NuBone/ 42.9mm
FINGERBOARD: Bound rosewood, pearloid trapezoid inlays, 305mm (12") radius
FRETS: 22, medium/jumbo
HARDWARE: Tune-o-matic-style bridge with roller saddles, licensed Bigsby B70 vibrato, Wilkinson WJ44 tuners with cream plastic keystone buttons – nickel/chrome-plating
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 52mm
ELECTRICS: 2x Wilkinson M Series MWHZ zebra coil humbuckers, 3-way toggle pickup selector, individual pickup volume and tone controls
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.88/8.54
OPTIONS: No
RANGE OPTIONS: There are plenty of V100 models, from £439 (see website). The V100AFD (£569) features a similar 'tiger-stripe' top without vibrato; the V100T (£529) comes in 3 'Flamed Thru' colours
LEFT-HANDERS: Yes, 5 different V100s from £519
FINISH: Flame Thru Black (as reviewed), Flamed Purpleburst, Flamed Amber – high gloss to both body and neck

John Hornby Skewes
01132 865381
www.vintageguitarsrus.com

8/10

PROS Competent build; good weight for the style; rock-aimed voicing; that in-tune Bigsby setup

CONS Not very original, but Vintage is not alone there

BOSS DS-1W DISTORTION
£125

WHAT IS IT? Boss's long-running distortion pedal is given the Waza Craft treatment

3
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Distortion
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BOSS
技 WAZA CRAFT
2

Dish The Dirt

The famous DS-1 has been on sale since 1978, but now here's a revamped version of Boss's best-selling compact pedal

Words Trevor Curwen **Photography** Phil Barker

1. The Mode switch lets you choose between S for Standard DS-1 sound and C for a new Custom sound that's louder, thicker and more touch-sensitive
2. Boss created an icon when it came up with the compact series – and the design remains to this day. Turn the thumbscrew and you'll get access to the battery compartment
3. This LED will, of course, let you know when the pedal is active, but it's marked 'Check' because it can tell you your battery status, too – it dims as the battery power lowers

Over the past few years Boss has been introducing Waza Craft versions of some of its compact pedal series: premium versions featuring a complete redesign of the original circuits by the original developers. Some of these have been welcome revamps of pedals that have been out of production for some time, such as the CE-2, the DM-2 and the Dimension C. But this latest is not only one of the earliest Boss compacts but one that has been continuously in the Boss catalogue since 1978 and is, in fact, its bestseller. The DS-1W retains the original pedal's triumvirate of Tone, Distortion and Level knobs but features two modes selected via a top-panel toggle switch. S is Standard mode, offering the sound of an original DS-1, while C is a new Custom mode, which delivers an alternative take on it.

Firing up the pedal in S mode you're confronted with a sound that will be familiar to many, considering that Boss has sold over 1.5 million units and the DS-1 has been put to prominent use on stage and in recordings for the past 44 years! There are no clean sounds here – you're into hard-edged distortion from the get-go with the Distortion knob at zero and the Level knob cranked up fairly high (from three o'clock onwards) to make sure the sound doesn't recede as you kick the pedal in. The sound here is characterised by scooped midrange, but it can be nicely tailored with a Tone knob, which sets just the right balance of rolled-off bottom-end with strident highs.

Switching over to C mode, you'll notice a volume jump as it's 6dB louder with a different midrange profile. The sound is thicker with the mids poking forward, giving more presence to cut through a mix, and that extra 6dB offers much more leeway in adjusting the Level for a boost. What's more, there's increased sensitivity to picking and volume knob control, engendering a more dynamic playing experience suited to a range of musical scenarios.

Verdict

The Waza Craft pedal roll-out has given us a wealth of options that go beyond what the original pedals offered in terms of sound quality, sound variation and playability – and this latest one is no exception. All that familiar, classic sound is still there, but the added mode's rich and tactile distortion makes this version of the pedal a much more versatile proposition. G

BOSS DS-1W DISTORTION

PRICE: £125
ORIGIN: Japan
TYPE: Distortion pedal
FEATURES: Buffered bypass
CONTROLS: Tone, Level, Distortion, S/C switch, Bypass footswitch
CONNECTIONS: Standard input, standard output
POWER: 9V battery or 9V DC adaptor (not supplied) 15mA
DIMENSIONS: 73 (w) x 129 (d) x 59mm (h)

Roland Europe Group Ltd
www.boss.info/uk

Guitarist CHOICE

9/10

PROS Welcome update on a classic; two very usable modes; increased tactile response and more usable volume in C mode; classic Boss Compact ergonomics

CONS Not a thing

THE RIVALS

The original Rat pedal was launched around the same time as the DS-1 and features a similar three-knob control surface; the latest version is the Pro Co Rat 2 (£75) and there's also a Lil' Rat mini version (£69). Fender's Pugilist (£89) offers a neat take on the distortion pedal genre as it features dual gain engines with independent Tone and Gain controls for each – you can stack them in series or mix them with a Blend knob. The MXR M75 Super Badass Distortion (£91) lets you dial in tonal nuances with three-band EQ alongside its Distortion and Output knobs.

The Pro Co Rat series has been a distortion favourite since the late 1970s

WALRUS AUDIO EONS FIVE-STATE FUZZ
£235

WHAT IS IT? A fuzz pedal with five distinct sonic options and powerful tweaking options

Gimme Five

Walrus Audio adds to its Five-State range of overdrive and distortion effects with this quintet of fuzzes in one box

Words Trevor Curwen **Photography** Phil Barker

1. This rotary Mode switch selects one of the five fuzz modes onboard the pedal
2. While the pedal runs from a standard nine-volt supply, you can actually vary the voltage that's applied to the fuzz circuitry in a range from three to 18 volts
3. Some fuzz pedals aren't well-equipped with EQ adjustment, but between these Bass and Treble knobs you can do a wide range of tonal shading

Third in the series of Walrus Audio's Five-State pedals, the Eons fuzz follows the Ages overdrive and the Era distortion, which offer five different gain states and five distortion modes respectively. Adopting the same basic format, a five-way mode switch gives you distinct variations on the fuzz effect, which can be tweaked with an array of five knobs. Volume, Gain, Bass and Treble controls may be standard kit in a dirt pedal, but the secret weapon here is the fifth knob, which can adjust the pedal's operating voltage, starving the circuit from 18 volts down to a 'battery-on-its-last-legs' three volts.

Mode 1 delivers a traditional silicon fuzz that can be smooth and sustain-y, and features plenty of leeway for focusing the overall sound via the two tone knobs, plus loads more via the voltage knob. Lowering it moves things from the wide-open sound to extreme spitty and gated but with plenty of subtle variation to be explored along the way. Mode II features a bass boost at the front-end of the circuit, offering a quite different take on silicon fuzz, with loads of extra girth if you need it. The tonal territory covered here makes this a viable substitute for situations where you'd reach for a Big Muff.

We also get a lovely dynamic germanium fuzz in Mode III, and a slightly darker LED clipping from Mode IV, both of which add drive/distortion utility to the sound palette. But it's the last mode, V, that's the most raucous of all on offer here. Its combination of hard clipping (silicon transistors) and soft clipping (LED and silicon diodes) is mightily impressive. This is a fuzz for all seasons, with great texture to it, that can be nicely tailored with the active boost/cut tone controls to deliver ripping fuzz with a raspy edge, further enhanced by just rolling the voltage back a touch.

Verdict

Walrus has created a go-to source for a wide range of fuzz sounds. If you want to experiment with a varied range of tones and textures, there's plenty here to keep you occupied. Or if you've yet to invest in a fuzz box and are undecided which to go for, this may be your ideal single-box solution. What's more, if you already have a particular favourite fuzz flavour that you stick to, rest assured you'll find something here to complement it. G

WALRUS AUDIO EONS FIVE-STATE FUZZ

PRICE: £235
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Fuzz pedal
FEATURES: True bypass, 5 modes, adjustable voltage, active EQ
CONTROLS: Volume, Gain, Bass, Treble, Voltage, Mode switch, Bypass footswitch
CONNECTIONS: Standard input, standard output
POWER: 9V DC adaptor (not supplied) 100 mA
DIMENSIONS: 67 (w) x 125 (d) x 58mm (h)

FACE bvba
+32 3 844 67 97
www.walrusaudio.com

Guitarist CHOICE

9/10

PROS One pedal with five fuzz options; compact size; powerful active boost/cut tone controls; variable voltage

CONS None really, unless beige-coloured boxes aren't your thing

THE RIVALS

Multi-mode fuzz pedals anyone? Well, there are few around, including the Thermion Stone Age (£249), reviewed in issue 486, which has four different fuzz engines onboard and a switchable octave. There's also the germanium transistor-based Crazy Tube Circuits Constellation (£220), inspired by classic British fuzz boxes and featuring a six-way switch designed to offer Fuzz Face, three versions of a Tone Bender, a Rangemaster and a combination Rangemaster into a Fuzz Face. SolidGoldFX has the If 6 Was 9 MkII (£199), which is based around silicon transistors, lets you vary voltage from five to 15 volts, and has three selectable voicings, plus Bias adjustment.

Thermion's "multi-engine" Stone Age offers four fuzz flavours

theWishlist

Dream gear to beg, borrow and steal for...

PRS Robben Ford Limited Edition McCarty £4,995

CONTACT **PRS Guitars** WEB **www.prsguitars.com** WORDS **Neville Marten** PHOTOGRAPHY **Phil Barker**

Robben Ford's spectacular note choices, exquisite time-feel and a tone never short of breathtaking have made him a monster in the blues-meets-jazz field. As well as his vintage Gibsons, Fenders and Epiphones, Robben has been playing PRS for some time, so talking to Paul Reed Smith about a guitar like this was all but inevitable. Robben says: "I think Paul is the only guy out there innovating, the only guy coming up with real results. But the best part of the relationship has been the incredible willingness to keep looking deeper and trying this and that. That's priceless!"

There's nothing about the Robben Ford McCarty model that screams 'different', other than perhaps the visual lack of a figured maple top (though you can see it's flamed from the revealed 'faux' edge-binding). Unusually for PRS, this is jet black nitro gloss; it looks stunning. Delve deeper and one or two other things stand out. Although it's the classic PRS build of mahogany back and neck with violin carve maple cap, the cream-bound fingerboard is not rosewood but African blackwood, and suits the 'tuxedo' vibe perfectly. Tuners are vintage-style with ivoroid tulip buttons, the nut is bone, and according to Smith the PRS combined bridge and tailpiece with brass inserts adds tuning stability and sonic vibrancy to the guitar.

Robben is particularly pleased with the neck profile and playability. This is PRS's 'Pattern' neck, an updated version of the 'Wide Fat' variety Paul favoured in the early days. It feels spacious and perfectly proportioned, with no huge difference in feel from the nut to the 20th fret, where it meets the body. "It's perfect," asserts Robben. Who'd argue with someone who knows their way around a guitar neck like he does?

"You want the top-end bright but not piercing, and the low-end deep but not muffled," says Robben of the pickups. And through our Orange Rockerverb 50 that's exactly what we got – clanking cleans and a menacing 'bark' from the bottom-end. Controls are simple: single volume and tone, plus a mini-toggle coil-split that gives Robben the clarity he loves. The nickel covers are etched with Ford's 'dojo' emblem; the headstock on each of the 200 limited-edition guitars is signed by Paul, and the control cavity cover by Robben. We've not seen this perfect a marriage between player and manufacturer for a long time. Will we get an unlimited version? Or better still an SE? Fingers crossed!

1. PRS's headstock design was radical when first introduced, but decades on it's become part of accepted guitar furniture with its pointy corners and a shape that cleverly mirrors that of the body. Straight string-pull through the nut was always a prime concern to Paul Reed Smith, and here we have the exclusivity of his signature, hand-signed, as well as the Robben Ford LTD truss-rod cover

2. For this limited run of 200 guitars, Robben has signed the control cavity cover plate. Smith's signature on the peghead front, the 'dojo' pickup logo and 'Robben Ford LTD' engraved truss-rod cover leave us in no doubt as to who made this guitar – and for whom!

3. Paul Reed Smith has spent years refining his combined wrapover bridge and tailpiece design – it's a thing of engineering beauty in itself. The strings rest on brass inserts that lend both sweetness and life to the guitar's tone, while the slots' compensated nature means that intonation will never be a problem. Players such as Joe Bonamassa and Billy Gibbons reckon that this style of 'overwrapping' lends a slinkier feel, too

4. As with most PRS guitars the Robben Ford's 635mm (25-inch) scale neck is deeply set into the body, with a long heel that Paul Smith says adds rigidity and therefore better tone transfer. To go with his guitar's 'tuxedo' look with its glorious ebony nitro finish, the 254mm (10-inch) radius fingerboard is made from African blackwood and bound in 'faux' bone. Inlays are what PRS calls 'Old School' birds made from solid green ripple abalone

5. The Robben Ford McCarty's control layout is both simple and versatile. Single master volume and tone controls look after the basics, while the standard three-way pickup selector offers neck, bridge, or both pickups on. In addition to this, Ford stipulated a coil-split switch as he's a particular fan of a single coil's clarity (as witnessed by his longtime use of a 1960 Fender Telecaster). This simple but intuitive layout provides the best of all worlds

6. Ford describes how difficult it is to translate what you hear in your own head to someone that's producing a guitar pickup to match it. But over several prototypes and trials, between them he and Paul Smith decided on humbuckers with a detailed high-end and flab-free bass. Robben is more than pleased with the result, his 'dojo' logo providing the final seal of approval

Gas Supply

Our pick of the month's most delectable and wallet-bothering new gear

TRUE VALVE TONE
On the face of it, the LA-Studio is a valve-driven lunchbox amp: there are three ECC83 preamp valves, and a 12BH7 power valve gives us a three-watt output (switchable to 0.1 watts)

TRADITIONAL FEATURES
This non-master volume amp has four input voicings split into two channel groups. The LA-Studio can connect to a regular eight/16-ohm speaker cab, and there's MIDI control, too

BEST OF BOTH
Laney is calling the LA-Studio's mix of valve tone and digital speaker emulation processing a "real plug-in", thanks to the Two Notes Torpedo Remote software

Laney Supergroup LA-Studio £849

CONTACT **Laney Amplification** PHONE **0121 508 6666** WEB **www.laney.co.uk**

JARGON CRUNCHING
DynIR
Two Notes changed the DI game with its Torpedo range of direct boxes. Its DynIR takes the static 'snapshot' nature of an impulse response by making them, well... dynamic. This gives much greater control over tailoring the IR's response to the rest of your rig with microphone, acoustic environment and additional studio-style processing.

I thought the lunchbox thing had been done?

Then you thought wrong! This isn't just another cute little valve amp (although it is that, too). The Laney LA-Studio forms part of the brand's Supergroup line-up, which, as you may or may not know, aims to capture the Brit amp brand's classic tonality but with features designed to make it applicable to the demands of guitar players today. In the case of the LA-Studio, that means low wattage, multiple voicings, MIDI control and, perhaps most intriguingly, a full Two Notes Torpedo module for going direct.

Sounds like there's a lot going on. Break it down for us, will you?

Right, we'll start with the more familiar amp stuff. It's a three-watt valve amp running off three ECC83 (12AX7) valves in the preamp section, and there's a 12BH7 in the power stage (Class AB). That three watts is the maximum output power, but Laney has included the front-panel Brake switch, which drops the wattage further to 0.1 watt – handy, as this is a non-master-volume amp. As you can see from the front panel, there's three-band preamp EQ plus a Presence control, as well as a Gain control.

Why are there so many jack sockets?

That's where the multiple voicings come in. The four inputs are arranged as two pairs (Bass and Treble), with two variations of each. They're fairly self-explanatory in how they differ, but Laney actually describes the Bass channels as being "neutral" in terms of their frequency response, while also pointing out that they're good for pedals. The Treble inputs have a boosted high-end response, and the second inputs in each category are set to give less gain overall.

Hmm... so can I jump the channels, then?

Yes, you can! You just plug your guitar into whichever input you want to use as your 'core' sound, then plug the corresponding input on that channel into one of the other two remaining inputs with a jack cable. This will allow you to have the bass and treble channels running together.

Where does Two Notes come into all this?

Around the back, there's a pretty well-stocked Torpedo Embedded module built into the amp. This gives you a DI output on an XLR connection that routes the amp's signal to a PA or audio interface, as well as a headphone output.

On the back of the amp (see below) a Two Notes Torpedo module provides a DI output that makes use of Two Note and Laney DynIR impulse responses

The Torpedo module has its own output Level control to determine how much signal you're sending out, and there's a clip LED to make sure you don't go over, too.

What's that Virtual Cabinet control?

That's a six-position rotary selector that lets you select a speaker cab DynIR. The LA-Studio comes with two DynIRs from Laney, and another eight from Two Notes – plus there are two more available when you register the amp. These IRs can be edited in Two Notes' Torpedo Remote software, where you'll have control over the virtual room, microphone type and placement, EQ and more. When you're finished, you can fire up to six of them into the amp for recall away from the computer.

So can I hook this up to a normal speaker cabinet, too?

Yes. There's a pair of speaker outputs on the back (eight and 16-ohm) if you want to play through a passive cab, although the amp is also designed to function without any load connected. Also on the back panel are MIDI in and out sockets for comprehensive remote control of the amp's features. Tune in next issue for our full review. **[SW]**

ALSO OUT NOW...

SOLDANO SLO £229

If you like your high-gain tones with a touch of class, then you'll be familiar with Soldano's legendary Super Lead Overdrive amp. Now 35 years since it originally launched, the boffins at Soldano have crammed the cascading gain stages of its revered amp into a pedal of the same name. Featuring a full three-band EQ control set, plus Volume, Gain and Presence controls, and a side-mounted Deep switch apeing the Depth control of the amp, the SLO pedal aims to deliver punchy amp-in-a-box tones from your pedalboard.

www.soldano.com

FENDER ACOUSTASONIC PLAYER JAZZMASTER £1,049

We love Fender's Acoustasonic range, but we also love saving money, too, which is why it's great news that the Acoustasonic Jazzmaster has now joined the Player series line-up, shaving over £500 off the entry point to an offset Acoustasonic. As with the Acoustasonic Player Telecaster, this one is made in Mexico, and it features the classic Jazzmaster outline in a mahogany body/mahogany neck pairing. There are two (rather than three) elements to the electronics, with the same Acoustasonic Shawbucker magnetic pickup as the US Acoustasonic JM, plus the Fishman-powered under-saddle pickup. These are controlled by a three-way selector switch, plus a Blend control with a master volume knob. It comes in four colours: Ice Blue, Shell Pink, Antique Olive and 2-Color Sunburst.

www.fender.com

THE LINEUP

Fretbuzz

A monthly look at must-hear artists from all corners of the guitar world, from the roots of their sound to the tracks that matter most

Artist: Jake Xerxes Fussell

Album: Good And Green Again (Paradise Of Bachelors)

Jake Xerxes Fussell's fourth album, *Good And Green Again*, features his own compositions for the first time alongside interpretations of songs from the South
www.jakexerxesfussell.com

Hailing from Columbus, Georgia, and now based in North Carolina, Jake fingerpicks a Tele live, which helps him maintain a sensitive playing style

The son of creative parents (folklorist father and artist/teacher mother) from Georgia, Jake began his journey on solid ground and has become an inimitable collector and performer of traditional and more obscure songs from the South. "I listened to a lot of classic fingerpickers from the South when I started out," Jake tells us. "People like the Reverend Gary Davis, Mississippi John Hurt, Elizabeth Cotten and Etta Baker. But also there were the pre-war artists like Blind Blake and Blind Boy Fuller who were important."

Serving The Song

Jake found himself in circles where he could learn styles from notable musicians firsthand. "There was a blues guitarist from Talbot County, Georgia, called Precious Bryant, who I was learning from," he says. "My playing grew from there and I tried to develop my own style from all of those influences. My real aim is to do good service to the song. I don't want to be a showboat guitar player and I don't really admire guitarists who play loads of notes. There are instrumentals on my records, but I don't consider myself an exhibition guitarist. I have to leave room for the vocal melody."

"My real aim is to do good service to the song... I don't consider myself an exhibition guitarist. I have to leave room for the vocal melody"

PHOTO BY TOM RANKIN

Instrumental Breaks

These instrumental pieces, such as *16-20* from 2019's *Out Of Sight* and *Frolic* from this year's *Good And Green Again*, play a strong part on Jake's albums. "I don't play those ones live as much," he says. "I put those on record partly to give the listener a break, especially from the long narrative ballads. Also, it's an opportunity to do something fun in the studio. But because I have limited time on stage and I'm usually by myself having to carry a few different parts, I focus more on the song. I have friends in the instrumental guitar world, like William Tyler, Nathan Salsburg and Daniel Bachman, but I'm more of a song-based person."

Make Some Noise

Although the acoustic guitar is more prominent on *Good And Green Again* than previous albums, when playing live Jake almost always uses his 70s Telecaster, perhaps a more unusual choice of instrument for a solo folk singer. "Well, I lived in Mississippi for almost 10 years," he reasons. "People talk a lot in the clubs and bars there, and it's not the sort of place where you can sit and do a quiet show for an attentive audience. People go to bars to drink and talk, and I noticed that when I played acoustic, it didn't matter if I had a pickup or fingerpicks, I still found myself banging away on it in a way that wasn't very conducive to my style of playing. It was sounding too harsh, whereas with electric I could play more softly, sing better and get more across."

Weighty Workhorse

"I got it about 12 years ago," says Jake of his Tele. "It's from 1976 and it's one of the heavy ones, I think it's made of ash. I never thought I'd be a Telecaster person. It's not that I didn't like them, I just wasn't so drawn to them. Before I got it I had a Les Paul and a couple of Gibsons. I had a friend called Jim Mark, who unfortunately passed away, and he had a lot of guitars. When he died, his family got some of us together to play music with them and we each got one of his guitars, so that's where my Telecaster came from." **[GK]**

Standout track: *The Golden Willow Tree*
For fans of: Reverend Gary Davis, Elizabeth Cotten, Steve Gunn, Mississippi John Hurt

GETTING TO KNOW YOU

Why Jake welcomed the Telecaster into his sound

Jake took his time bonding with the Telecaster he was given, slowly discovering its charm. "It's funny with Telecasters," he says. "At first, I was a bit bored because everything was so easy, but then I realised that, tone-wise, it was so sensitive in ways I really liked – and it became my main instrument. It has stock pickups on it and somebody played the hell out of it before me or Jim [Mark] had it, so it has quite a bit of wear. It also has speaker knobs for the volume and tone – I don't know who put those on there!"

PHOTO BY CASEY RYAN VOCK

THE LINEUP

Albums

The month's best guitar music – a hand-picked selection of the finest fretwork on wax

Rebecca and Megan Lovell dish up some Southern sizzle

PHOTO BY JASON STOLTZFUS

Larkin Poe
Blood Harmony

Tricki-Woo Records (available now)

9/10

The sisters return with their sixth dose of Southern rock

We've been keeping a watchful eye on the sisters from Georgia since they first appeared on our radar. The multi-instrumentalist Lovell sisters – Rebecca (lead vocals, guitar and keyboards) and Megan (lap steel, resonator and harmony vocals) – may now be based in Nashville, but their music remains loyal to their birthplace tradition: gritty, slide-driven, riff-laden Southern rock. *Blood Harmony* is the sisters' sixth studio album on their own Tricki-Woo label and was recorded largely in their own studio. "When steering by your own stars, you never quite know where you're going to wind up," they tell us. "Our true north is unique to us, and in following our true north without compromise, we have been out freewheeling this world on the ride of our lives."

Blood Harmony begins with *Deep Stays Down*, stripped down with vocals, resonator guitar and drums, gradually building to a level of intensity that's going to shake the foundations. The rest of the album keeps up the momentum, stopping off for some heartfelt ballads along the way. *Might As Well Be Me* is a good example, with smouldering vocals from Rebecca very much in the same ballpark as Susan Tedeschi or even Bonnie Raitt. As far as creating atmosphere is concerned, *Lips As Cold As Diamond* would be hard to beat, but the out-and-out rockers such as *Southern Comfort*, with its Lynyrd Skynyrd overtones, and the album's title track show the sisters at their best. Watch out for them on tour in the UK in 2023. **[DM]**

Standout track: *Lips As Cold As Diamond*
For fans of: Chris Whitley, Tedeschi Trucks Band

Bert Jansch
Bert At The BBC

Earth Records (available now)

8/10

Staggeringly comprehensive archive of acoustic legend's BBC appearances

Bert Jansch was certainly no stranger to BBC Radio. His appearances on the medium began way back in 1966 on *Guitar Club* and continued well into the 2000s. Earth Records has gathered together as much as the Beeb's vaults could yield, adding up to 147 tracks over eight CDs and totalling eight hours and 38 minutes of largely unreleased material. Throughout the chronologically arranged tracks Bert can be heard playing solo or accompanied by artists such as John Renbourn, Pentangle, Ralph McTell and Albert Lee. Needless to say, the recording quality varies, the older tracks showing their age a little, but all such concerns are overridden by the treasure trove of music presented here. Highlights include Bert's 60th birthday concert from 2003, but any acoustic folk fan will be delighted with this comprehensive collection. **[DM]**

Standout track: *Blackwater Side*
For fans of: John Renbourn, Ralph McTell, Pentangle

Bill Frisell
Four

Blue Note (available now)

8/10

Rich quartet album from eclectic jazzman

Bill Frisell's third album for Blue Note Records sees him in a quartet setting with Gerald Clayton on piano, Johnathan Blake on drums, and Greg Tardy on saxophone and clarinet. Certainly, there's a freshness, an exploratory quality to the music that's in keeping with much of Blue Notes' past canon of classic recordings. *Dear Old Friend* is a pleasingly soft and warm opener, headed up by Greg's saxophone, and *The Pioneers* has a bluesy Americana quality with Bill's rich-sounding guitar flitting between chords and counter lines. Meanwhile, the funky *Holiday* explores staccato rhythms and angular lines as the band darts around itself, and the moody *Lookout For Hope* keeps the ears peeled as piano and guitar provide sizzling chords alongside bass clarinet phrasing. We found the bluesy New Orleans-leaning *Waltz For Hal Willner* to be most inviting, as is *Good Dog, Happy Man*. **[JS]**

Standout track: *Lookout For Hope*
For fans of: Julian Lage, Pat Metheny

PHOTO BY SCOTT DOUBT

Steve Hill's 'one-man band' talents are in rude health on *Dear Illusion*

Steve Hill

Dear Illusion

No Label Records (available now)

8/10

Multi-instrumentalist releases spirited blues-rock gem

Heavy blues-rock fans will like this new album from Steve Hill: 10 tracks of upbeat, horn-section-infused songs with great vocals and punchy guitar. *All About The Love* has a slinky riff and gospel-like big beat drums, the stinging solo with a biting Texas vibe, à la Albert King. The motorway-friendly *Keep It Together* has a spirited drive, whereas the ZZ Top-tinged beat and rhythm of *Everything You Got* has chart-single quality stamped all over it. The title track is a passionate ballad and *Steal The Light From You* has a great Tom Petty/Americana vibe. Drop D riffer *Don't Let The Truth Get In The Way (Of A Good Story)* tells a good yarn and is augmented by horn section The Devil Horns. **[JS]**

Standout track: *Steal The Light From You*
For fans of: ZZ Top, Tom Petty

Devin Townsend

Lightwork

Inside Out Music (available now)

9/10

10 new tracks from enigmatic Canadian rocker

Written over the past few years, *Lightwork* has a broad sonic spectrum of heavy guitars, drums, orchestras, synths and vocal stacks, and the songs were guided with Devin's friend and producer Garth Richardson. While he has a skill of combining very heavy music with operatic crafting, *Lightwork* leans more towards lighter music and arrangements, with less of the intense thrash metal sound he's known for. The title track is a good example of this: the choruses are expansively huge, but the verses are lighter with a soft nursery rhythm quality. *Equinox* has a big pop-electronica vibe with breathy vocals, while the synth/detuned guitar riffing on *Heartbreaker* is appealing as are his vocals – interesting guitar lines later on, too. For sure, Devin never disappoints! **[JS]**

Standout track: *Heartbreaker*
For fans of: Ayreon, Vola

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NEVILLE'S ADVOCATE

Caveat Emptor (Buyer Beware)

Neville Marten recalls how playing thousands of good and bad instruments has gained him a degree from the 'guitar university of life'

Back in the old days we had to learn about guitars from experience, or from the few books at our disposal, many of whose 'facts' it turned out were rather questionable. Thank goodness for Professor Google! I was a total ignoramus when I first started buying guitars. My first quality instrument was a 1967 Tele, and my next the infamous 'Jimi' bitser Strat. The Tele was the round-lam rosewood-fingerboard type, while the Strat had a slab neck. I therefore presumed all Teles were round lam and all Strats slab 'boards. It was years before I found out. But I took them both to bits and learned how they were put together and how the geometry of the guitar's action worked. It set me in good stead for later.

"On my first day as a guitar repairer at Selmer I was given a Gibson J-200 and a can of Nitromors paint stripper... Now, that's a baptism of fire"

Then came a Gibson ES-335. I'd heard the owner was selling two, and I was to be given a choice. He turned up at my house and opened two cases. One had a gloriously dark see-through cherry finish with gorgeous swirly grain, while the other was a brighter red. The dark one was a 1962 model and the lighter one a '67. "The newer one's got the narrower nut width," the seller told me. "That's got to be good," my ignorant brain reasoned, swerving me towards the later guitar (which, at £140, was also 20 quid cheaper).

The clincher, though, was that the older instrument had the guy's name emblazoned on the upper horn in gold gothic script. I had no idea that these simple transfer letters would come off with warm, soapy water and a bit of polish or T-Cut, so I went for the '67. A decision fuelled by ignorance and miserliness. As it happened, it turned out to be a great guitar, but I would have been better with the wider nut of the '62; it was a better looker, it possibly had PAFs on it, and if I still had it would be worth three times as much as the '67. Hey ho!

At the time, a very good friend had a 1972 black Les Paul Custom. He'd bought it through one of the guys at Selmer's on the employee scheme, where staff could purchase musical instruments at trade price. He lent it to me and I adored it. It had Grover tuners, Gibson stamped pickup covers and was built stupendously well. It also came in a beautiful brown crocodile case, had a fabulous neck and I wanted one so badly.

Wonderstuff?

He gave me his contact's name, I duly ordered mine and couldn't wait for it to arrive. What a disappointment. It had waffleback Kluson tuners that slipped, the attention to detail was shoddy, but worst of all it had 'fretless wonder' frets. These were tiny and levelled so the tops were flat and the edges sharp. Another lesson learned. I did, however, trade it for two sunburst Telecasters, both maple-necked but one with a separate fingerboard – the guy explained that for a while in the late 60s Fender did some guitars like this. More knowledge gained.

Four years later I was working as a guitar repairer at Selmer. On my first morning I was given a Gibson J-200 and a can of Nitromors paint stripper and told to take it back to the wood, sand it and fill the grain ready for spraying. Now, that's a baptism of fire if ever there was one. Over the ensuing years I took fingerboards off Les Pauls, necks out of ES-335s, fixed dozens of broken SG headstocks, refinished guitars in every hue we could think of, and lots more.

I know nothing like as much as the many brilliant experts we have at our disposal today, but I have a pretty good understanding of how guitars actually function, and have been lucky enough to play (and learn from) thousands of great and not-so-great instruments. It never stopped me buying a 'dog' or two, though. I hope you don't think I'm blowing my own trumpet, just saying that any type of knowledge is good, and how we can always learn more. Got any guitar purchase horror stories of your own you'd dare to share? Do send them in to the usual address.

GAS OF THE MONTH

Tuxedo Junction

What? Epiphone Les Paul Custom
Where seen? www.guitarguitar.co.uk **Price?** £519

I actually remember what I paid for my Les Paul in 1973. It was £280, which was trade price plus what my contact whacked on for his trouble. At around double that but almost 50 years on, this Epi represents bonkers value. Epiphone has its act so together at the moment, that almost anything we try is a winner. We love the new headstock style, and an LPC in Ebony is still one of the all-time best lookers. This one has a solid mahogany body and neck, genuine ebony fretboard, powerful Gibson ProBucker 3 at the bridge and 2 at the neck, gold hardware and a Graph Tech nut. Frets are medium jumbo, scale length is Gibson's very nominal 628.65mm (24.75 inches) and the fingerboard radius is 304.8mm (12 inches). A guitar that looks this good, is as well made as we expect it to be, plays and sounds like the real deal, at a fraction of a CS model's price, has to be the no-brainer of the century!

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CONFESSIONS OF A LUTHIER

Under Pressure

This issue, **Alex Bishop** deals with the twin troubles of tension and playability that you may encounter when building a guitar

I made the surprising realisation this week that there are no less than 18 projects currently underway in my workshop. Among various repair and restoration jobs in progress were my current builds, my students' guitars and a half-abandoned electric guitar that I started building for myself (which inevitably ends up taking a back seat in lieu of more important work). I welcome the diversity of the jobs, but this month one subject just kept cropping up: tension.

"The three factors that affect string tension are the material and thickness of the strings, the tuning, and the scale length of the instrument"

It started when one of my guitar-making students asked me why two of his classical guitars appear to have different amounts of tension in the strings, and it got us into discussing the factors that affect string tension, how to calculate it, and what else might be at play. Fundamentally, there are only three factors involved here: the material and thickness of the strings, the tuning, and the scale length of the instrument.

Hanging up in the middle of the workshop is the fanned-fret Gypsy jazz guitar that I've been furiously polishing in advance of some upcoming guitar shows. The skewed fretwork has been a talking point with visitors to the shop, who often erroneously believe that the slanted frets must have something to do tuning or intonation. In fact, the fanning of the frets is just a consequence of using different scale lengths for each string. The purpose of this is simply to alter the tension of the strings; by shortening the higher pitch strings they slacken slightly, so melodic phrases are easier to play without any loss of power in the lower strings for chordal playing. Not to mention the frets are slightly closer together, making navigation of the fretboard a little more efficient.

This, of course, assumes that you are comparing against a guitar that's tuned in the same way. I have been servicing a road-worn Lowden from a regular customer this week, setting it up for DADGAD tuning. To achieve this three strings are slacked down from standard tuning a whole tone. Some players regularly playing in this tuning might opt for an altered set of string gauges from the usual sets in order to keep the feel of standard tuning.

I have run the occasional guitar setup 'masterclass' this month, too, a great opportunity to encourage players with low string gauges to experiment with higher gauge strings and different materials as a way to improve tuning and tone. For example, stringing up with flat-wounds (instead of the more common round-wound strings) will bring warmth out of an otherwise thin-sounding guitar. However, changing string types and gauges is another factor in determining actual string tension, so it is important to be aware that a setup should follow in order to maintain a slick, playable action. Normally, an adjustment of the truss rod is sufficient, something my students are less afraid of once we work through it together.

Alex's Gypsy jazz guitar has fanned frets, a feature that uses different scale lengths for each string, therefore altering the strings' tension and aiding playability

PHOTO BY ALEX BISHOP

Spot The Difference

However, my classical guitar playing student was still bemused by the differences in the tension between his guitars. Given that the scale length, strings and tuning were the same, what could be going on here? The tension isn't changing so there is something between the two instruments that makes them feel different from one another. Close inspection reveals that the necks are not identical: one has a shouldered 'D' profile, the other is a rounder 'C' shape. They are also made from different materials, one built from wenge (an unusually hard, dense timber), which is heavier and alters the balance of the instrument, putting a little extra weight onto the fretting hand.

It's all these extra factors that actually contribute towards the feel of an instrument. While they don't affect string tension, I can understand how a player might interpret them in this way. It ultimately explains why we just 'click' with some guitars and not others. Perhaps it takes an instrument that looks beautiful and is fun to play to go some way towards easing that tension that holds you back. G

Manson

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And Custom For All

Fender's Mod Shop offers buyers the chance to custom-build a new guitar – and it's cheaper than going the Custom Shop route. Our editors try it out

Up until recently, if you wanted a modded Fender you could either do the work yourself or dig deep and order a Custom Shop guitar. While the allure of CS instruments hasn't waned, neither has their price tag – CS electrics typically cost north of three grand these days, with Heavy Relic aged instruments just shy of £5k in many cases. That's simply out of reach for the majority of players, no matter how toneful or vibey the instruments themselves may be.

Nonetheless, we live in an era of personalisation, and over in the States the option to customise your purchase is built into every burger and beverage order, never mind the stuff you *really* dream of buying. That's why Fender has made a big deal of its Mod Shop service in recent weeks. Not quite a new concept but one that is now fully operational, the Mod Shop offers a way to customise production-line Fender models to your preferred spec via point-and-click online ordering. The resulting guitars take a few weeks to be built but get delivered quicker than Custom Shop orders – and they're cheaper, too.

"We were impressed with the range of finishes available, from Sonic Blue and Sherwood Green to an eye-popping 80s-style Slime Green"

We had to admit, the premise was intriguing. One of the more frustrating aspects of buying stock guitars is that you might set your heart on a particular vintage reissue, say, only to find it hard to get hold of in the finish you really wanted. Likewise, Fender's Factory Special Run versions of Strats, Teles and the like – which tended to boast rare finishes and perks such as Custom Shop pickups – tend to sell out quickly just by dint of their Limited Edition nature. Wouldn't it be nice to just design your own 'Factory Special Run' guitar from scratch and have it on demand? We visited the Mod Shop on Fender's website (www.fender.com/en-GB/mod-shop.html) to give it a try. Here's what we found.

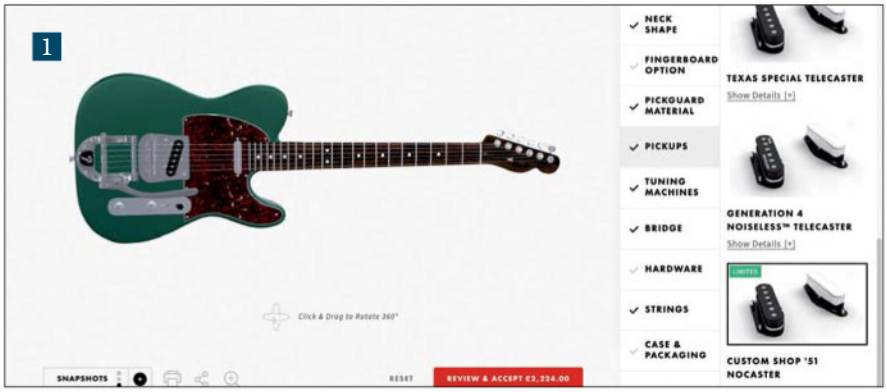
Custom – With Caveats

The first thing you notice is that the Mod Shop treatment is limited to a few core US-built platforms. You can customise Strats, Teles, Jaguars and Jazzmasters, while in basses you can mod Precision and Jazz instruments, and in Acoustasonic, you can build your own Strat-, Tele- and Jazzmaster-based instruments. Unless you were thinking of customising a Meteora, hockeystick Electric XII or Bass VI, however, you're unlikely to be too disappointed with those boundaries, though conceivably some buyers might wish for baritone options, which aren't on the table as yet.

First, you choose the model you want to customise, then the site loads up an archive of customisation options while you wait. Once loaded, the user interface displays a 3D model that is visible at all times during the build. You can spin the 3D model round, zoom in on key features and see the effects of changes made to your chosen design in real-time. Want to try a different finish? Just click on your new colour choice and you'll see the virtual model of your guitar change colour to match your selection – and so on.

A navigation bar on the right of the screen (if you're using a laptop or desktop computer) displays all the things you can customise, starting with whether the guitar is to be left- or right-handed. There's no apparent upcharge for designing a left-handed Mod Shop guitar – a huge benefit for lefties, who are traditionally starved of choice. After this, you choose the wood the guitar is made from and the finish it comes in, then run the gamut through plastics, hardware, tuners and other features that can be customised, including bridge and pickups.

A quick exploration of the options available gives a clearer picture of what you can and can't do in Mod Shop. In short, you can do quite a lot but not everything. First off, we were impressed with the range of finishes available, from classics such as Sonic Blue, to 50s and 60s Custom Colours such as Sherwood Green and Shell Pink, to eye-popping 80s-style finishes such as Slime Green. However, if you choose body woods that Fender thinks are best suited to transparent finishes, such as roasted



1. There's a pretty broad range of pickups available for most builds, but be aware other spec choices you make will affect what's on the menu for a given design, such as body style

2. Once you've completed your design, hitting the Review & Accept button will generate a factory spec sheet known as a 'Traveller', which will be used during construction of your guitar

3. Want something a little off the beaten track? Fender's Mod Shop is pick-and-mix for guitarists!

pine, you'll find the options are much more limited. In the case of pine-bodied Strats, for example, there are only two finish options available: Sienna Sunburst and Butterscotch. Whereas if you'd chosen an alder body for your Strat, you would have had 43 finishes to choose from (at the time of writing).

Likewise, the breadth of the options available to you in other areas such as pickup choice will depend on how the guitar is configured. If you choose the commonest pickup layout for a Strat – three single coils – you'll find there are multiple vintage and modern pickup sets to choose from. Choose an HSS or HSH layout and those options narrow a bit. You won't find masses of hand-wound exotica to choose from, but some Custom Shop pickups are available as 'Limited' options. Think of these like guest ales in a pub – namely, they might not be available as options forever, so if you like the look of them it's best to select them for your build while you can, though take note that there is typically an upcharge for such 'Limited' appointments.

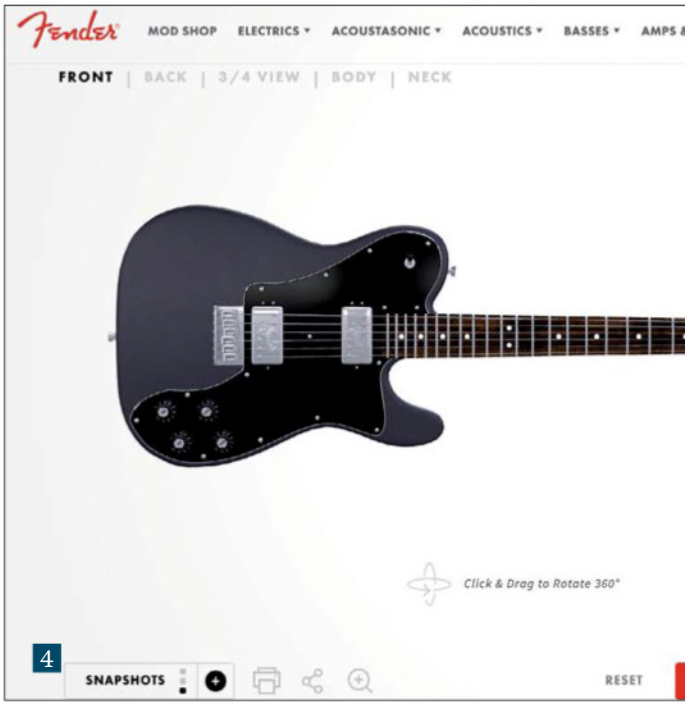
Slightly disappointingly you can't currently choose pickups used by other Fender-owned brands, such as Gretsch, nor can you put Tele pickups on a Strat, for example. But that makes sense; this isn't a full Custom Shop experience (there are currently no aged-finish options, for a start), more a chance to pick and choose which standard-production features you'd like to have on your next Fender with a few Custom Shop goodies thrown in to spice things up. It's a little more surprising that you can't currently specify fancy wiring options such as S-1 switches – for the time being at least. If that's a problem, you might want to look at off-the-peg instruments such as the American Ultra series instead, which do have advanced switching features and are comparably priced.

We would also like to see roasted maple necks offered as a choice in Mod Shop in the future – however, Fender says it will introduce new 'Limited' options as time goes by, so we'll cross our fingers on that one. Our only other mild gripe is that, currently, you get much less breadth of choice in pickups on the offsets than with Tele and Strat builds. It'd be nice to see a greater range of pickup and hardware appointments offered for Jaguars and Jazzmasters in future, so here's hoping.

Cost Versus Benefit

Speaking of price, how much does customisation via Mod Shop set you back? The answer varies according to your choices, but if you pick a pretty conventional spec that doesn't stray too far from existing production models, the outlay is, we think, pretty reasonable. For example, an off-the-peg American Professional II Strat with an SSS pickup layout, rosewood 'board and a solid-colour Miami Blue finish costs £1,499 or thereabouts in UK retailers. If you build a similar guitar in the Mod Shop with a vintage Sherwood Green metallic finish and a reverse headstock it costs £1,844 (at the time of writing). Add Custom Shop Fat 50s pickups, currently available as a 'Limited' option, and the cost rises to £1,934. So, if you don't go crazy with the options, you can get a unique guitar for 300 or 400 quid more than a stock one. You could certainly fit alternative pickups to a stock guitar yourself, but undertaking aftermarket finish and neck mods is a bigger task. So the

"If you pick a pretty conventional spec that doesn't stray too far from existing production models, the outlay is pretty reasonable"



4. The Mod Shop shows off the adaptability of classic Fender designs. In this pic, we tried building a twin-humbucker Tele made for heavy contemporary rock, complete with locking tuners and a solid rosewood neck to match the dark overall styling

upcharge is pretty reasonable as these are official factory mods and thus less likely to affect resale value negatively, unless you choose something *really* weird.

Delivery to UK customers from the point of order is eight to 10 weeks. This includes Fender's commitment to build Mod Shop orders within 30 days at the Corona, California, factory, ship your bespoke guitar to Fender Europe, upon which it undergoes further quality inspection, spec checks and a full setup, before being shipped on to you. While this is longer than delivery for a standard production guitar, it is substantially less than the lead time for a full Custom Shop order. Reassuringly, the spec details you select for your guitar are checked and rechecked at multiple points in the build and shipping process.

Our Builds

While it's quite good fun to casually build fantasy Fenders on the Mod Shop homepage, Neville Marten, David Mead and I set ourselves the challenge of each coming up with a design that would be our own personal Mod Shop order, were we ever to place one. We then asked Fender if we could arrange for a lucky reader to win their choice of one of the designs we came up with (see How To Enter). Here's what we chose... G

www.fender.com/en-GB/mod-shop.html

WIN! ONE OF GUITARIST'S THREE MOD SHOP GUITARS

If all this has whetted your appetite for owning a Mod Shop-built guitar, you're in luck as we persuaded Fender to let us try the service out for real – with one lucky winner taking home their choice of one of the staff-designed Mod Shop guitars below. To enter, follow the instructions (right) then if you are lucky enough to be drawn as the winner here's what happens next. You'll choose the guitar you want to be built from the selection of three below and Fender will have it made. Please note that build and shipping time to the UK will be eight to 10 weeks and we'll also review and photograph the finished instrument at *Guitarist* before speeding it on to you to enjoy, along with a few studio images of your new pride and joy as a memento. We promise it will be worth the wait! Now, all you have to do is pick which one you like most...

Sherwood Jazzmaster (Jamie's Build)

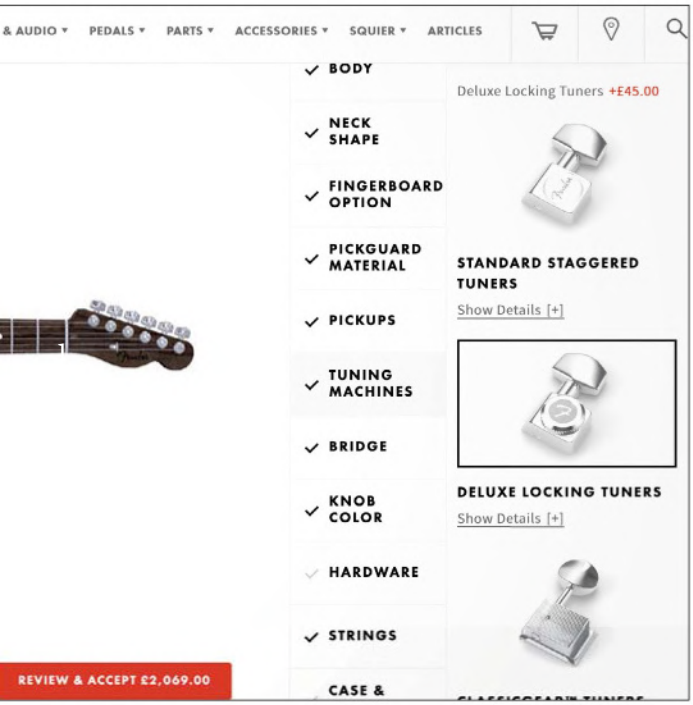
"I opted to take the classic Fender Jazzmaster, which we so often see in the guise of a historic reissue, and give it a high-end, modern twist that hopefully still looks classic. To that end, I chose a solid rosewood 'Deep C' profile neck with contemporary Standard Staggered tuners and matched it to an alder body finished in Sherwood Green metallic finish with a tortoiseshell scratchguard and black plastic parts to tie the dark, chocolate-brown rosewood neck in with the body. There was only one choice of pickups available, but I've liked all the V-Mod series pickups I've heard so far and they match the contemporary tilt to the design. To finish it off, I spec'd 10-gauge strings instead of nines to help the classic bridge work to best advantage."

70s Blonde Strat (David's Build)

"My choice is a tribute to a mid-70s hardtail Strat I bought in the 80s and sold in a fit of madness in the early 2000s. The build is as close as I can get to the original using the custom options – the real thing's significant roadwear added a lot of mojo, but relicing isn't on the menu here. It has a roasted pine body (not the original's ash); it's nice to have some grain showing through a translucent finish. The finish is Butterscotch Blonde with black plastics, a characteristic of many mid-70s Strats, as is the large headstock and rosewood 'board. I chose Custom Shop '69 pickups to get as close as possible to the originals, in date at least. The neck has a modern C profile, and I went for classic tuners. There's something about a hardtail Strat that you have to experience to really appreciate."

Bigsby-loaded Tele (Nev's Build)

"I've never had the nerve to go for a Bigsby-equipped Tele, but with that option on offer, why not? Like Jamie, I opted for a solid rosewood 'Deep C' profile neck, again simply because the choice was there and it could lend a slight sonic twist as well as that unique look. Pickup-wise, I wanted a Noiseless Tele style at the bridge and a Shawbucker at the neck, but it wouldn't allow that, so I settled on the Yosemite Humbucker/Single Coil configuration, which I'm sure is fine. Body timber, finish and pickguard choices were simple: Burgundy Mist Metallic on alder, with a white pearl 'guard. Surely a no-brainer? I went for 10-gauge strings, too, and not the nines as pre-ticked, since a Tele should fight back a bit, and nines with a Bigsby is surely asking for trouble. Quite a cool guitar, I think!"



COMPETITION! HOW TO ENTER

To be in with a chance of winning one of the Fender Mod Shop guitars designed by our editors, answer the question below correctly and enter online at: ***http://bit.ly/GIT493fender***

What year was the Fender Stratocaster first introduced?

a) 1951
b) 1954
c) 1959

Terms and conditions:
By taking part you agree to be bound by these terms and the competition rules at: **https://www.futureplc.com/competition-rules/**. The opening date for entries is 12:00 (GMT) on 2 December 2022 and will close at 23:59 (GMT) on 2 February 2023. The competition is free to enter and entries must be submitted via **http://bit.ly/GIT493fender**. Late or incomplete entries will be disqualified. Entries are limited to one per individual. Open to all UK residents aged 18 and over, except employees of Future Publishing Limited ("Future"), Fender Musical Instruments Corporation ("Sponsor") and any party involved in the competition. There will be one (1) winner entitled to one of the three guitars shown in this feature provided by the Sponsor. The winner will be randomly drawn from all valid entries received and shall be notified by Future by email or telephone within 14 days of the closing date. Upon notification the winner will be required to supply details of a UK delivery address and confirm their chosen guitar shown in this feature. If the winner has not responded after 2 weeks of being notified that they are the winner, an alternative winner will be drawn. The chosen instrument will be built by the Sponsor in California, United States, and shipped to the UK for review and photography at *Guitarist* magazine within an estimated period of 8-10 weeks. Once the review and photography are complete, the guitar will be shipped by Future to the winner. The prize is non-transferable and non-refundable. There is no cash alternative.

AUDIO ▶ http://bit.ly/guitaristextra

Voice Leading

Richard Barrett shares some useful gradual transitions between chords around the fretboard

If you've ever arranged a chord progression to avoid unwieldy jumps between chords (in either physical or intervallic terms), then you've already applied this principle to your playing. Voice leading has also been described as when the transition between chords encapsulates the melody, as opposed to a top line played over block chords. Have a listen to some Joe Pass and you'll hear this in action.

The five examples transition between A minor and Fmaj7 by moving one note of the chord down a semitone at a time – or chromatically, to use the technical term. If you were to play an A minor, D7 then Fmaj7 using barre chord shapes, and then play the examples one after the other, you'll get a sense of how the 'voices' in the chords have been arranged to transition gradually, rather than jumping from one place to another. Neither approach is 'better' than the other, but understanding how to move chord voicings around gives you greater options on the fretboard – and who doesn't want that?

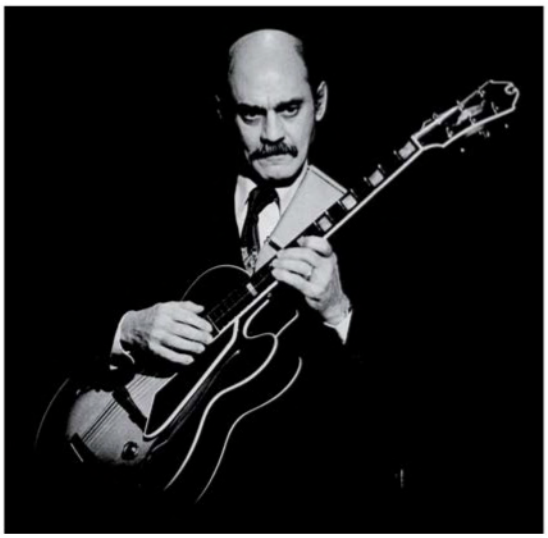


PHOTO BY PAUL NATKIN / GETTY

Joe Pass was renowned for his skilful use of voice leading

Example 1

This A minor shape is our starting point. All the examples retain the same A minor triad on the top three strings (C E A). The moving note (in this case the root) on the fourth string functions as the 'voice' or melody note that leads us through the chord progression.

Example 2

Shifting what had previously been the root down a semitone to G# at the 6th fret gives us this Am/maj7. This may sound contradictory, but the name describes a minor chord with a major 7 added. Played on its own, this is very dissonant, especially with the A on top, but it functions well as a 'passing' chord, leading to the next example...

Example 3

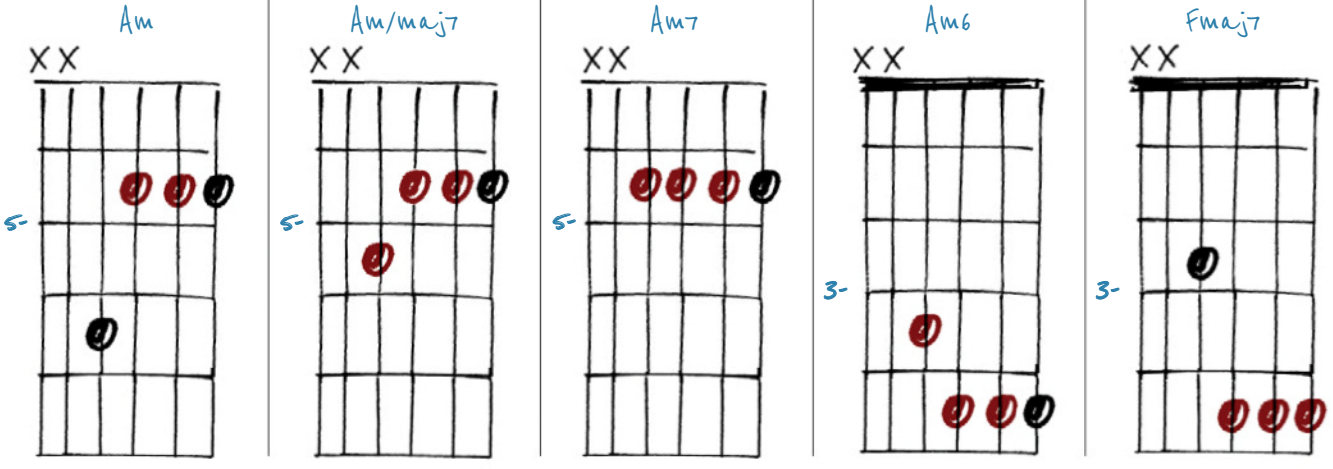
Moving down another semitone on the fourth string gives us G natural and this Am7, resolving the dissonance of the previous chord. This 'tension and release' has been a popular musical device for centuries. As an extra point of interest, a C6 chord would fit nicely here by simply adding a low C as the root.

Example 4

As we continue down the fourth string, the next chord is an Am6, courtesy of the F# at the 4th fret. If we were to add a low D as our root, this would give a D9 chord, which would fit nicely after the C6, if you chose that option.

Example 5

This final example functions as an Fmaj7, thanks to the F on the fourth string. If you're feeling adventurous after adding the bass notes to the last two examples, try keeping the low D from the D9 in place. This will give you a nice Dm – just another option.



REAL PLUGIN

LA-STUDIO

REAL TUBE HEAD | Two notes AUDIO ENGINEERING | SUPERGROUP DESIGN

Laney BLACK COUNTRY CUSTOMS HANDCRAFTED IN THE UK Two notes AUDIO ENGINEERING

Feedback

Your letters to the *Guitarist* editor.
Drop us a line at guitarist@futurenet.com

STAR LETTER

KILLING FLAWS

I'm after a bit of help in understanding the persistence of design flaws or poor detailing in the mainstream guitar market by the big companies and those that are "inspired by" or just copy them.

The ageing craze baffles me, but nothing looks cooler to me than a Les Paul or an SG. The continual inclusion of original design flaws that golden era guitars had I simply don't get, though.

We all know that the heel and cutaway on a Les Paul restricts upper-fret access, and if we had no option but to be honest we would all say it's not a clever design. While the likes of Patrick Eggle, PRS and even Sid Poole many years earlier have improved the design, the big brands and their many copyists continue to churn out guitars with this inherent fault, and unbelievably we buy them without complaint. Similarly, if you look at a Telecaster switch position, it is so close to a control knob that you can't get your finger behind the switch. It's just poor design, but do they change it? Not on your life.

Imagine the outcry if a car maker released a car now without power steering because "that's how they were back in the good old days". Yet guitarists seem to happily excuse poor design that can easily be improved without detriment. Why do we tolerate it?

Peter Collister

Thanks for your thoughts, Peter. The evolution of the electric guitar is, as you say, tempered by the human inclination towards liking familiar things – especially when guitars like the Les Paul, warts and all, are icons of music culture. Change the details and, for some, the dream is watered down. Also, Gibson and other big brands know historically accurate design is a selling point that no-one else can truly lay claim to, so they make it work for them. The second thing to say is, 'But actually they *have* addressed those design issues!' Take the Les Paul Axcess (pictured), which has a sculpted heel blended with the body and weight relief. It's still a part of Gibson's range, last we checked. It's just not their main, best-selling variant of the venerable LP because... well, we guess lots of people like things made the way they were in the good old days, with a few tweaks and upgrades here and there to add relish. Guitar design has rarely been about pure function; like cars, they have to engage our hearts. And design heritage, retrograde or not (you decide), is part of that.

VOX AMPLIFICATION LTD.

Each issue, the Star Letter will win a pair of Vox VGH AC30 guitar amplifier headphones!
www.voxamps.com

SALE OF THE CENTURY

I read with interest David Elliott's buying and selling spree [Feedback, issue 491]. Around 1980 I bought a mid-70s CSL Super Fuzz pedal for £10 from a secondhand shop in Newcastle-upon-Tyne. I used it with my first two bands in the 80s going into the clean channel of a Carlsbro Stingray Super combo. By the 90s it was stored away in the loft with my other pedals. My second band reformed in 2013 and by then I had quite a collection of overdrive pedals. I realised a fuzz pedal didn't really suit my style of playing any more. After some internet searching I found that the remakes of my pedal were selling for £350. I listed the fuzz pedal on eBay in July 2016 with a start price of 99p and after a few bids a French guy offered me €350. I turned him down. The auction ended and the same guy paid £560/€700!

With that windfall I bought an Orange Micro Terror amp, a Bugera 212V-BK cab, a Mooer M6 pedal case and three mini pedals – Rowin Flanger, Delay and Distortion. Not a bad return on my £10 fuzz box.

Roger Judd

I think that story takes the prize, Roger. It's crazy how sought-after old Tone Bender-derived pedals are getting. They're definitely a hot sub-genre of the vintage collector market. Even accurate hand-wired reissues of some of old Tone-Benders aren't cheap and end up being collectable in their own right. In your case, we believe a connection with Ed O'Brien of Radiohead's work probably boosted the desirability of the CSL, but the market shows no signs of cooling off at present. We just saw a similar CSL Super Fuzz listed on Reverb for £1,326! The bottom line is you were able to buy a bunch of nice gear you use all the time with the proceeds of selling yours, so everyone's a winner.

Roger's CSL Super Fuzz pedal fetched a pretty penny at online auction

Your letters to the *Guitarist* editor. Drop us a line at guitarist@futurenet.com

Nick was very recently reunited with his '71 Sunburst Les Paul after 16 years apart

UNBURIED TREASURE

Just got your 70 Years Of The Les Paul issue [492] and wondered whether you'd be interested in my guitar [pictured above], which is one of the rarest. I bought it in 1974, kept it for 32 years, part-exchanged it 16 years ago for a '68 Goldtop, saw it two weeks ago in Denmark Street and bought it back. It was in a loft for those years and unplayed since I sold it. I have literally never seen another one.

It's totally original – pots, frets, tuners, and so on – apart from some of my ham-fisted soldering with a heated up screwdriver when a wire came loose. It's really heavy and has a completely different tone from the Goldtop.

Nick Goldreich

Thanks, Nick – your 1971 Sunburst LP with P-90s is a beauty and arguably cooler than either the Deluxe with mini-humbuckers or the Goldtop quasi-reissue Gibson released around that time. Enjoy your reunion!

STRINGING ALONG

I was very intrigued by many facets of Neville Marten's article in issue 491 [Neville's Advocate]. Firstly, I was intrigued beyond words at his penmanship where he could fill virtually a whole article by only chatting about as simple a thing as a plectrum. It brought to mind that we tend to overlook the most obvious candidates when looking for that elusive tone.

This was brought home to me fairly recently by a lucky find of a set of new strings. They were D'Addario Nickel Wound strings and how they came into my possession is beyond me. To say I was astounded is an understatement of the highest degree. The difference was nothing short of phenomenal! Six weeks later my colleagues were still asking me if I had fitted new strings. To put it in a nutshell, I had a new-sounding guitar for the price of a new set of strings.

Jim McLanaghan

Thanks, Jim, and congratulations on your tone epiphany – strings are a seriously underrated way to change your guitar's whole sound and, perhaps even more importantly, its feel. If you've never tried doing so before also try lighter and heavier gauge strings than you normally use. Even a simple thing like that has transformed guitars we previously haven't got on with into go-to instruments, and on acoustic guitars the difference is even more important as changing string type is one of the few ways to tweak the guitar's unamplified tone. Best of all, new strings are far cheaper than new pickups and the like, too. So be adventurous and try plenty of sets – you might not get on with everything, but you might just strike gold again.

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Guitarist GEAR OF THE YEAR

"Chunky, detailed and as hot as you'd ever need for classic rock and more"
Guitarist Magazine - 2022

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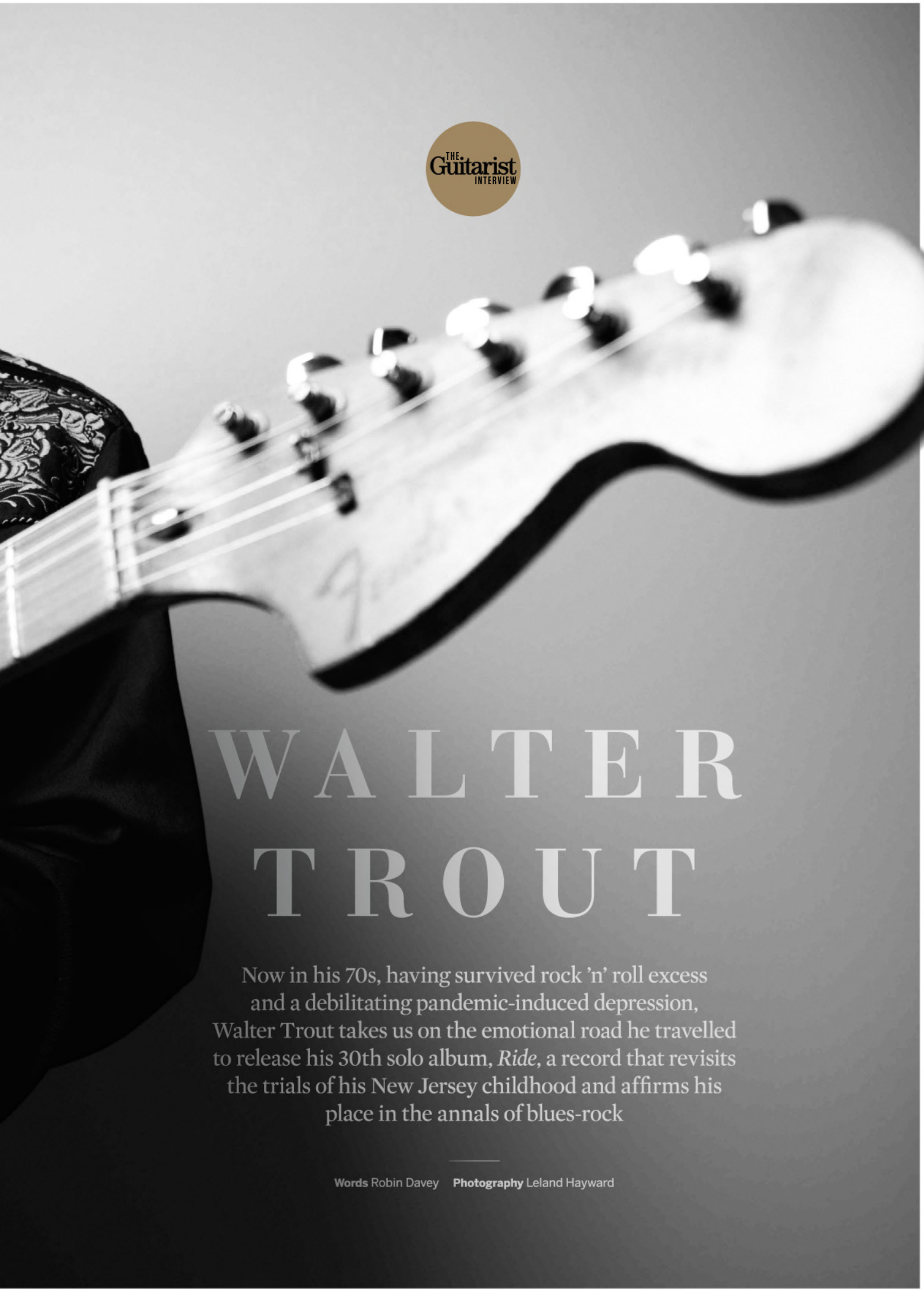

THE Guitarist INTERVIEW

WALTER TROUT

Now in his 70s, having survived rock 'n' roll excess and a debilitating pandemic-induced depression, Walter Trout takes us on the emotional road he travelled to release his 30th solo album, *Ride*, a record that revisits the trials of his New Jersey childhood and affirms his place in the annals of blues-rock

Words Robin Davey **Photography** Leland Hayward

We are just five minutes into our interview with Walter Trout when he starts to well up. It's been an emotional time for the 71-year-old. A few years ago Walter became so unwell that he required a liver transplant. He was holed up for eight months in hospital and it very nearly killed him. When he finally returned home he couldn't walk, let alone play the guitar. He recalls a conversation he had with his longtime partner-in-sound, Mesa/Boogie. Walter told them: "I can't play any more, it's gone from my memory, I don't know how to do it. I'm going to start over." They responded by sending him two amplifiers. "They've never asked me to pay," he tells us. "They just said, 'We hope you get your music back.'"

Talking in person to Walter it is easy to understand why Mesa/Boogie made this gesture; he is a smart and kind man. If you've ever witnessed Walter on stage you'll understand that he goes into everything he does with full commitment. Looking at his tour schedule, it's hard to imagine where anyone would get the energy to continuously hop both sides of the Atlantic, let alone with a new liver and all the complications that puts on the immune system, especially in a world still dealing with the aftermath of Covid.

In fact, it was just a few years before the pandemic that Walter finally got back on stage, making a triumphant return at the Royal Albert Hall. He was frail and thin, but the fire never left him. Having finally got his groove back and his chops up to gigging speed, it all came crashing to a halt again, as the pandemic hit.

"We were out there killing it and suddenly it stopped, everything stopped," he remembers. "And it's hard to even find the words for what that felt like. One of the reasons is that after I faced death every day for eight months in that hospital, I am deeply aware of mortality – and how much longer do I have to do this? I am deeply grateful, I'm even going to lose it here," he says as his voice starts to crack. "Every day that I get to go on stage, and play to somebody, and look them in the eye, and see if I can create a feeling and an emotion in that person, and we can communicate – every day that I get to do that I'm overjoyed, and I'm grateful and thankful."

Nevertheless, the forced hiatus sunk him into a state of depression, heightened by the realisation he was here on borrowed time. "[It created a real] depth of depression. I fought the depression, and I went and stayed in our house in Denmark with my wife and my family – we have a house in a little fishing village on the North Sea, population of 500 people. We're in the middle of a national park, so we sequestered, and I spent time walking in nature with my wife and my kids, trying to just stop and enjoy life. But it's very difficult. I'm a driven artist, I'm driven to create, and I'm driven to play, and I'm driven to write and to sing – and that's my calling."

Walter doesn't take a moment of his life or career for granted: "I'm a driven artist, I'm driven to create, and I'm driven to play... that's my calling," he says

Got The Blues

During lockdown, Walter would spend hours every day trawling YouTube for lessons, staying connected to his guitar and his passion. "I would go on there, and it would say, 'Learn to sweep-pick like Yngwie Malmsteen.' So I'd sit there and I'd do that for hours and for days, and see if I could get it down until I would say to myself, 'I really don't give a fuck about trying to play like this. I want to play blues-rock. Bloomfield! I want to be Mike Bloomfield; I don't want to be Yngwie Malmsteen.' But I was trying to expand my technique, especially because I only have three fingers."

As if he didn't have enough to deal with, Walter recently broke the little finger on his left hand, rendering it unusable. "It doesn't work," he says, "so I did spend a lot of time on [YouTube] trying to learn new techniques and new approaches. But that kept me involved, and I also wrote a lot of songs. I tried my damnedest to stay connected to my music."

"I played with John Lee Hooker, with Big Mama Thornton, Percy Mayfield, Bo Diddley, Lowell Fulsom, Pee Wee Crayton… The list just goes on…"

Walter came out of the pandemic with hundreds of song ideas, recorded on his American phone, his Danish phone and on his computer. Then, one day, his son Dylan asked his dad to join a Zoom call. And there, alongside his wife (and manager), Marie, were his band, his producer, Eric Corne, and Ed van Zijl, owner of the Mascot Label Group.

With a chuckle he recounts: "Marie and Ed said, 'For your birthday, we have negotiated a brand-new record deal.' Then Eric said, 'And I have booked a studio.' And the band said, 'We have gone and given our okay to the studio.... It's now March 6, and in April you're going home and making a record – and that's your birthday present.' My wife said, 'We're doing this because your soul is melting away sitting on the couch, trying to learn how to sweep-pick,' or whatever the fuck I was trying to do.

"One day – I think Joe Bonamassa will appreciate this – I went on [YouTube] and it said, 'Learn to play like Joe Bonamassa,'" Walter

continues. "And I'm sitting there, playing this, and my keyboard player came on Zoom. He said, 'Walter, play like Walter. You're 70 years old, you already play like yourself – just play.'"

The resulting album, *Ride*, features 12 tracks full of fire, passion and a reflective honesty, with themes of life and death, and a strong thread of childhood memories. "I started thinking about my youth, when I lived in a town called Laurel Springs, New Jersey – a little farm town," Walter says. "We lived in a big old house right next to a railroad track, and I would lay in bed at night, and that train would go by, and the whole house would shake, the bed would shake. In the first couple of weeks it pissed me off, and then it calmed me down and it soothed me. I would fantasise about getting on that train and getting the hell out – because I was going through some real sort of traumatic stuff for a kid at that point with my home and family life.

"I started thinking about that, and I took this song idea, and within about 10 minutes I had this song about that house. It took me three days to actually get the first song, three days of sitting around really kind of frustrated. 'I've got all these ideas, what am I going to do with this?' And then that song came out about the house in New Jersey, and it's called *Ride*, and it's actually the title track of the new record. The weird thing is, after the record was done and I sat and listened to it, I realised, 'My God, probably 70 to 80 per cent of this album is about when I was a kid.'"

IMAGE COURTESY OF WALTER TROUT

Now over three decades sober, Walter – pictured here with Mick Taylor (centre) and John McVie – hit the early 80s hard during his time with Canned Heat

Wild Ride

Walter credits John Mayall as being incredibly influential in his journey to where he is today. Mayall called Walter one day in the 80s and asked him to join his band. Previously, a chance jam with a blues band on a pier in Redondo Beach, California, had led to Walter joining John Lee Hooker's backing band. "I did that for two years with them. And with those guys, I played with John Lee Hooker, with Big Mama Thornton, Percy Mayfield, Bo Diddley, Lowell Fulsom, Pee Wee Crayton... The list just goes on. I was the guitar player and I learned so much about playing the blues from these guys. Because that was the real thing. I had not been in a blues band before.

"One day I was playing at The Lighthouse in Hermosa Beach, a legendary jazz club, and some kind of crusty biker-looking fellas came in and listened, and the next night they came back, but there were more of them. They came up and said, 'We are Canned Heat. Would you like to join our band?' The next thing I knew I was out on tour with Canned Heat, and about a year later Mr Mayall had the original Bluesbreakers back together, with Mick Taylor, John McVie and Colin Allen. We did three shows and opened for them.

"The first night John came up to me and said, 'Man, I love the way you play.' And at the end of the night he and I sat and talked for a couple hours about music, and we hung out. And I actually have a photo taken that night, a guy walked by with a Polaroid and took a picture of the two of us [pictured overleaf]. I took the Polaroid and asked him to sign it. I didn't know I'd ever see him again."

This was during Walter's wild years – he is now 34 years sober – but back then the rock 'n' roll excess was easy to fall into. The day after meeting John Mayall he stumbled across the Bluesbreakers back at the hotel and introduced himself: "'Hi, I'm Walter, I play in Canned Heat. You guys sounded great last night. Why are you drinking rubbing alcohol?" To which John McVie replied: "89 cents a bottle."

Walter had a better option: "I got a fifth of Smirnoff in my room," he recalls saying. "Let's go up. I've got the real thing." They ended up drinking the whole bottle. "Got rip roaring drunk. McVie was passed out unconscious on the floor. I had music playing. I got up and said, 'What does anybody want to hear?' Suddenly, McVie's head popped up off the carpet and he said, 'Please, no Stevie Nicks.'"

After those three gigs, John Mayall asked Walter to join the original Bluesbreakers, playing rhythm behind Mick Taylor. In 1984 he would join the band full-time in its new line-up, sharing guitar duties with Coco Montoya. Walter still has great respect for Mayall. "He is one of the great band leaders of history. And he has this knack of finding musicians that can play with each other, and complement each other, and create the sum of the parts to become this great thing. And that's one of his great talents, but he's also, to me, one of the greatest songwriters in blues history, and he doesn't get enough credit for that."

"I consider [playing music] a very noble pursuit. That is a beautiful higher spiritual endeavour, to bring joy into someone's life"

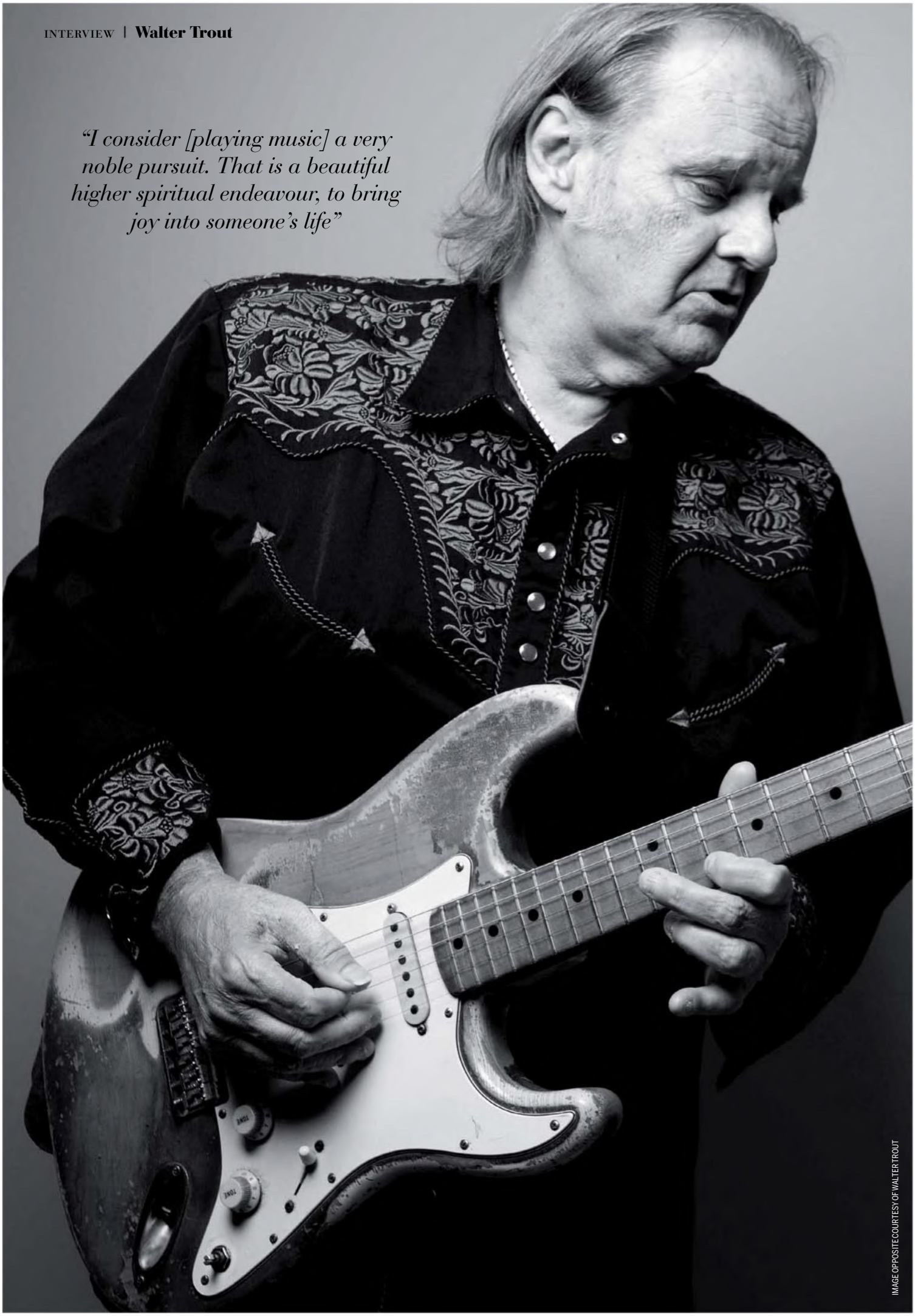

IMAGE OPPOSITE COURTESY OF WALTER TROUT

Mayall also had an influence on Walter branching out as a solo artist. A promoter in Europe heard a tape of Walter's band, who would play bars back in California. He offered Walter a run of shows. With the Bluesbreakers on a hiatus, Walter took a couple of the band members to back him up. Walter always had great respect for the way Mayall would deal with band members on the road and before this trip Mayall himself warned Walter that, two weeks into the tour, they were all going to hate each other. In preparation, Mayall handed him a cassette tape, saying, "When that happens, I want you to play this tape."

Sure enough, a fortnight into the tour, tensions were rising. Walter pulls out the tape and puts it into the vehicle's cassette player. "Well, I guess it's time for this mystery tape that Mr Mayall has given me," he told the occupants of the van. "So I unwrapped it, I put it in – and it was 45 minutes of him farting! He had walked around for three weeks with a recorder, and every time he had to fart he recorded it. And he had done a beautiful label on it that said, *The Farter Of British Blues*." A different kind of 'breaking' than the blues for which we know Mayall!

As a band leader, Walter learned a lot from those years. "I try to, in many ways, emulate what I saw him do," he says. "I want it to feel like a family, I want it to be joyous, happy, and we're having fun out here. If things get tough, like you've got to do a 12-hour drive and a gig at the end and you're all burned, let's go out there like a team and let's do it."

Musical Memories

Walter's solo career really took off in the early 90s when he had a big break in Europe. "I had a hit in Europe on my second album, [*Prisoner Of A Dream*, 1991], a huge, massive MTV and radio hit called *The Love That We Once Knew*. And I still have charts from 1990 where it's me, then Bon Jovi, Madonna and Bryan Adams – I was a one-hit wonder. That was a song that I wrote about my high-school girlfriend. It's a power ballad, a ballad I did on an acoustic guitar, and we put it on the record. So I was writing songs back when I was 16 and 17, and my first two albums were basically 90 per cent songs I had written when I was just starting out."

Canned Heat played three nights supporting the Bluesbreakers. Here, Walter is pictured with John Mayall after a memorable evening shooting the breeze

The colourful tales of touring are often thrown to the forefront when reflecting on a life lived in rock 'n' roll land, but along with the laughs there is also a constant reminder of darker times. "Sometimes, I wish I could maybe escape a little bit from getting caught up in the past, in reliving stuff. But sometimes I just can't help it – I'm still very affected by memories, you know? I can't block them out and they affect me deeply. There's a lot of people that I loved who are gone, and I'm like, 'What am I still doing here?', you know?"

Nothing encapsulates this sentiment more than the opening track on his recently released *Ride* album, *Ghosts*. He was driving through Denmark during lockdown when inspiration hit by way of a familiar tune from his youth. It was a trigger for Walter, both creatively and emotionally. "It was something like *House Of The Rising Sun* by The Animals, or something by The Beatles," Walter tells us, "and it brought back these memories of shit in my youth – some of it good, some of it bad. And I was weeping like a baby. I realised that nothing will do more to a person to bring back memories than music. You hear a song and it takes you back to your living room, in that house by the train, when I was listening to *Meet The Beatles!*, and my stepfather's drunk, chasing me around with a fucking axe, this kind of shit. So I just pulled over and I wrote those lyrics down on a napkin."

The lyrics tell the story: "I close my eyes and it don't take long, ghosts appear to me." It's this unfiltered approach that makes Walter continue to stand out in a scene that owes him a big debt. In the 90s when every guitar-led blues band seemed to be emulating the Texas shuffle of Stevie Ray Vaughan, Walter stayed true to his own approach to the blues – slowly but surely building a loyal following, not letting his 'one-hit wonder' status define him, all the time tuning the ear of his audience onto guitar-driven songs that weren't afraid to mix incendiary riffs with an accessible and heartfelt vocal.

His influence and shaping of the genre is undeniable, especially in the UK, where the likes of King King, Aynsley Lister, Danny Bryant, Laurence Jones and Chantel McGregor are all crafting their own careers, using the bedrock of the blues-rock audience that Walter has nurtured throughout his last 30 years as a solo artist. In another 30 years, it won't just be his songs that serve as ghosts to those he influenced but also his overall resilience to push through any obstacle and continue to do what he loves. His positive impact on all those musicians he has met – and invited onto his stage along the way – will stay with them, just as John Mayall did for him, ready to surface as inspiration when they find themselves in a funk. "What Would Walter Do?" should ring true on stages across the world.

"Every day that I get to play to somebody and see if I can create a feeling, an emotion in that person – I'm overjoyed and I'm grateful"

Back here in the present, Walter has no intention of letting up. "I intend to go out as much as I can, and to keep doing this till I can't do it any more," he says. "Being a musician, I consider that a very, very noble pursuit. That is a beautiful, higher spiritual endeavour that we try to do, to bring some joy into someone's life. And I intend to keep doing that as long as I can, whatever the circumstances."

Walter Trout's latest album, *Ride*, is available now on Mascot/Provogue
www.waltertrout.com

GEAR OF THE YEAR

IT'S THAT TIME AGAIN – WE PRESENT OUR PICK OF 2022'S MOST OUTSTANDING GEAR

Although 2022 may not have been a behemoth year for gear, we've played some exceptional guitars, amps and effects over the past 12 months – and what was, perhaps, lacking in outright quantity was amply made up for in quality. This year *has* been genuinely exciting when it comes to the tones, progressive features and build-quality of the instruments that have crossed our transom, to paraphrase one David St Hubbins.

Some of the most interesting steps forward have been in the realm of sub-£1,000 guitars, which continue to get better and better. The success of PRS's SE Silver Sky, one of 2022's best-selling electrics, was underpinned by fundamental quality not mere hype. Likewise, Epiphone's slick versions of classic Gibson designs such as the 335 has left many of us wondering if you really *need* to go further upmarket to find top-drawer sounds. Another area that continues to impress is amps – the definition of what an amp is, and can deliver, seems to broaden with every passing year. From lightweight valve combos to pro-grade digital modelling in a pedal, amp designers are thinking outside the hulking Tolex-covered box. In the world of effects, we've seen unobtainable boutique pedals go mainstream, as in MXR's Duke Of Tone collaboration with Analog Man, and mainstream effects go boutique, as with Boss's new DS-1W. Travelling in either direction, it's guitarists who are the winners.

But before we get into all that, a word on how we picked this year's winners. As you'd expect the winners were all instruments that were awarded either a 'Choice' or the coveted 'Gold' award during testing – though, as usual, we left the door open for the odd wildcard entry to be promoted to Gear Of The Year status if, after longterm testing or considered debate among the whole team, we felt an exceptional promotion was warranted. That means that anything that won an award here is a piece of gear that sounds great, performs brilliantly and will most likely surprise and delight you should you try it. And so, without further ado, let's open the golden envelopes...

MAINSTREAM ELECTRICS

Class doesn't always come with an inaccessible price tag as these four beauties prove

Words: ***Dave Burrluck***

YAMAHA REVSTAR RSS02T

Yamaha's 'just different enough' Revstar plundered the company's past and produced a striking range that, after seven years of production, was reworked for 2022. The MkII versions – which come in Indonesian-made Element and Standard versions, with the Japanese-made Professional model topping the line – retain the Revstar style, though the body width is slightly increased, and the Standard and Pro models are lightly chambered, while their necks have carbon reinforcement *and* feature a new Focus switch (a passive boost). The Standard RSS02T boasts the Café Racer-inspired tailpiece of the original model, along with those soapbar single coils. If you want to break away from the classics, start here.

Price: ***£649*** ***Website:*** ***http://uk.yamaha.com***

PRS SE STANDARD 24-08

You can trace this guitar back to the 1985 beginnings of PRS in the all-mahogany version of the maple-topped Custom. While the SE Standard has long been the most affordable PRS guitar, the 24-08 adds some neat pickup switching that replicates the true single-coil switching of various USA models. This 24-fret guitar pares back the posh aesthetic and produces some excellent sounds that are ideal for the player who needs to cover a lot of ground. Once again, though, the Cor-Tek-made guitar is superbly crafted and set up, and for this money – including a gigbag – is a real steal: "it's the diverse, quality sounds that elevate this 'start-up' guitar way beyond its price," we said in our review.

Price: ***£675*** ***Website:*** ***www.prsguitars.com***

MAGNETO U-ONE ERIC GALES

Eric Gales hooked up with Magneto over a decade ago and his Japanese-made signature, based on the Magento Sonnet, certainly has some style. But it comes at a price, so Magneto made plans for Chinese production with the U-One range for a more affordable version. Aside from its unique style with that gold-mirror scratchplate and Sunset Gold metallic body finish, we get pukka Gotoh hardware and a set of Metro-Poles Custom EG1 single coils, with a zesty hot vintage output and fast drive from the well-graduated master volume and tone – the keys to some very versatile voices. "A very cool-looking rerun of a classic that has enough original style to elevate it above the lookalikes," we said.

Price: ***£849*** ***Website:*** ***www.magnetoguitars.com***

MY YEAR IN GEAR

LESS IS MORE (MORE OR LESS) *by Jamie Dickson*

"As guitarists, it sometimes seems like we're either dreaming about owning something or selling it off – and often the latter enables the former. I'd argue we should simply keep what we use and let go that which we don't. I've never regretted selling gear by that rule, even things I'd held onto for a long time out of sentimental attachment.

"I recently put some amps up for auction at Gardiner Houlgate in Corsham – and by the time this article is published they'll have gone under the hammer: the Dr Z Jaz 20/40 I've used for years and a nice Fender Custom Shop Masterbuilt Woody Jr Exotic combo that graced the cover of issue 491. I've gotten into a more traditional British classic rock sound of late and, in fact, I've mostly been playing through an inexpensive Cub Super by Laney.

"I thought I'd feel an instant twinge of regret when they were listed, but instead I felt relief that the music room had more space in it and an unfamiliar pleasure in owning only what I used.

Of course, the Cub Super is only a 15-watter (fine for most pub gigs) so part of me thinks I should now use the auction proceeds to buy a higher-output stage amp to replace the 'big gig' capability of the Dr Z. Damn, here we go again..."

PRS SE Silver Sky

PRS's tie-up with John Mayer in producing the USA-made Silver Sky was – and continues to be – a runaway success. Creating the SE version at a third of the price was always on the cards, but there's little that sounds or feels cut-price here. PRS's obsessive attention to every detail, from neck shape to pickup voicing, not to mention the obvious aspects such as setup and playability, means the SE Silver Sky has *serious* validity: a slightly hotter, less pretty-sounding version of the USA model. To support that, Reverb's end of the year best-selling electric guitars chart places the SE Silver Sky in the No 1 slot, the USA model at No 4.

Look closely at the two guitars and you'll find plenty of differences. Indeed, many might actually prefer the SE's satin neck over the gloss nitro of the USA model, not to mention its slightly flatter fingerboard radius (216mm/8.5 inches). Then there's the two-post vibrato, more like the style used on PRS's Fiore than the six-screw Silver Sky vibrato.

"We've played all the major PRS SE models over the past two decades," we said in our review. "It's not hard to see, feel and hear the progression, and whether it's the neck shape or the smooth satin neck-back finish, this SE is the best we've played."

Price: ***£979*** ***Website:*** ***www.prsguitars.com***

MAINSTREAM ELECTRICS

Forward-thinking design meets vintage style with a host of quality appointments

Words: Dave Burrluck

Fender Player Plus Meteora HH

Based on a guitar that first appeared in Fender's 2018 Parallel Universe range, designer Josh Hurst "wanted to make something that was revolutionary while also recalling Fender's rich history". Well, it's certainly different (not least for Fender!), and as a guitar with a futuristic body shape and 'Fireball'-named humbuckers, we immediately pigeonholed it as a metal machine. How wrong we were. It was the voicing of those pickups with their Wide Range-like polepiece style that changed our minds, "combin[ing] clarity with enough power for light classic crunch on a cleaner amp..." we noted. "If you like lower-output 'buckers, especially designs from Gretsch or Guild, then you'll be at home."

Price: *£879* ***Website:*** *www.fender.com*

Fret-King Elise Custom

The original vision of Trev Wilkinson, and now owned by John Hornby Skewes, Fret-King has had quite an undulating past. But a new range based on many of Wilkinson's original guitars proves there's plenty of life left in these intelligent designs. The Elise is a *Guitarist* favourite, a downsized 368mm (14.5-inch) wide thinline that is crafted from solid wood, not plywood, and has formed the basis for signature models for Gordon Giltrap and John Etheridge. Today's version comes with a vintage-style vibrato, but our slightly cheaper hardtail version covers a lot of ground, from jazz and blues through to rockier intentions, thanks to a pokey bridge humbucker. Classic influences and thoroughly modern in style.

Price: *£979* ***Website:*** *www.fret-king.com*

Eastman Juliet PB

It might have been delayed by all the production shenanigans of the past couple of years, but when we finally got our hands on the Juliet, after being hugely impressed by both of Eastman's original Romeo models, it was worth the wait. Purposely not based on a classic design, the Juliet hints at some Firebird style with its raised centre section and actually comes across as something that could have been designed in the 70s. It uses okoume for its solid body and glued-in neck construction paired with an ebony fingerboard, Gotoh hardware and the UK's own Bare Knuckle pickups, a choice of humbuckers or soapbar single coils, custom tweaked from the brand's Old Guard models. Eastman is a class act.

Price: *£1,499* ***Website:*** *www.eastmanguitars.com*

I LEARNED FROM THAT

Call In The Pros *by Dave Burrluck*

"The key to successful modding is knowing when to stop and get help from people that do this sort of thing every day. I was lucky enough to spend some time with Jonathan Law and his team at Feline Guitars when I needed a couple of guitars refretted – not something I wanted to try on the kitchen table! Not only did the guys do a *seriously* good job, I got to learn first-hand so much about frets and their installation. It was like going back to college.

"Both guitars – a friend's early 70s Gibson Les Paul Deluxe and my own '76 Guild S-90 – had really low original frets and neither was getting much play-time, a big shame because both the Deluxe's mini-humbuckers and the Guild's original HB-1 humbuckers are really great-sounding pickups. Feline's sympathetic refrets restored both to super-playable, vibey guitars. Don't put it off: when you need help, call in the pros!"

PHOTO BY FELINE GUITARS

Epiphone
Joe Bonamassa 1962 ES-335

The latest model in the Joe Bonamassa-curated Epiphone range is this rather good classic thinline that won't break the bank. It's actually based on an original that Joe used on his first album and subsequently sold – then, after some 20 years, he got it back.

It might sit at the higher end of Epiphone's guitars in terms of price, but it also features Gibson USA Burstbucker pickups – a 3 at bridge and a 2 at neck – while pots are by CTS and the tone caps are by Mallory. And, of course, unlike Gibson's original 'sideways' vibrato, the Maestro Vibrola fitted here actually works. You also get a sturdy 'Bonamassa Nerdville, CA' logo'd case, plus case candy that includes the story of the guitar and a photo of Joe in a small booklet.

With its pretty big neck profile, we had no problems with playability on our review model and it was very well set up: "To be honest, we're looking for faults and struggling to find any," we said. "There's a vibrant and engaging acoustic response, too". All that is to say, it sounds quality, and in conclusion we commented that despite "A/B'[ing] it against some other instruments that cost twice and three times as much, we still couldn't find the catch".

Price: *£1,149* ***Website:*** *www.epiphone.com*

A YEAR IN GUITAR

THERE'S A STORM A'COMING

Rising prices are everywhere, including on our cherished guitars. We discuss the background to the ongoing price hikes with the head of PRS Europe, Gavin Mortimer

Words: Dave Burrluck

After some years of relatively flat, consistent prices, 2022 has seen numerous guitar companies pushing up their prices – and we can expect more. What's driving these increases? Or have guitar companies just gotten greedy?

"The biggest driver has been Covid," states Gavin Mortimer, emphatically. "For example, there was the price of a shipping container that ended up costing four times as much as it did pre-Covid. And during the height of Covid you were lucky to actually get a container on a boat because there weren't enough people... because of Covid! Now, expand that one illustration across all the parts necessary to make a guitar either in the USA or Indonesia. Literally, the logistical costs – fuel costs have doubled – and raw material costs have all sky-rocketed. Magnets for pickups, for example, went up hugely because there was a shortage, just like any raw materials. Wood? The cost of maple rose, for example, because people weren't able to fell trees; the cost of shipping mahogany from Africa or South America, on a boat [rose to] four times as much to ship. Every which way you look, the cost of making a guitar has rocketed exponentially.

"Then you look at the cost of people," he continues. "Suddenly, there's the cost of social distancing, PPE, testing, and so on, to allow the factory to run. When we had to shut down we still paid our staff, which in the USA is around 450 employees; some companies have 4,000 or 5,000 staff, and I'm only talking about USA factories. In reality, there has to be a payback: you can't have any of these added expenses for free, forever – or you simply wouldn't have a company.

"Covid is still here, of course, but just when we seemed to come out of the worst, there was the Ukrainian war at the start of the year. Immediately, that had a psychological effect on the European market; it didn't really have a financial effect for a few months, but then, all of a sudden, we have a massive devaluation of our home currency and the Euro. I just looked before we started this interview [in early November] and the pound is worth around 15.5 per cent less than it was against the [US] dollar 12 months ago. We, like many, pay for our guitars in dollars, so if a guitar previously cost us £1,000 [last year] it is now actually costing us £1,150: a 15.5 per cent increase at cost. And that happened probably early summer. We were at one point nearly in parity with the dollar, and the Euro was below the dollar. When you start to add that to the increased cost of making, shipping and the import and tax duties, which go on last, the costs really mount. Anyone in commerce will understand that: it's not new.

"But then you have a business decision. I can only speak for PRS Europe, but we looked at those increases and thought actually we should be putting our prices up around 25 per cent to put ourselves where we were. But that is absolutely not acceptable and I couldn't conceive doing that. So in September we raised our prices around nine to 10 per cent. It's not enough to fill the hole, but it's stopping it becoming a major problem."

Of course, many of these necessary increases are the reason why *everything* has gone up (except the nation's wages), and for many that will mean a shift in priority with a new guitar purchase hardly at the forefront. Typically, in times like these, it's the lower and mid sectors of the market that take the biggest hit as demand shrinks, while the higher end is virtually unaffected. "Yes, that's absolutely true," says Gavin, "but think of the width of the market, too. Think of a pyramid. So you've got your $200 lookalike at the bottom and let's say there are 1,000 of those sold every day. Suddenly, of those people, 60 per cent aren't going to do it and that's a massive 600 guitars per day that aren't getting purchased. At the top end of the pyramid, let's say there are six – a number out of the air – PRS Private Stock or high-end Gibson Custom Shop guitars that get sold every day. Now, it's maybe only four and that's not such a big deal. The number of people who would typically buy the low-end guitar are more likely to be suffering from the cost of living issues."

> *"The biggest driver has been Covid… Shipping containers, fuel, raw materials… The cost of making a guitar has rocketed exponentially"*

And while most suppliers struggled to meet the increased demand during Covid, many have caught up but are in danger of over-supplying dealers with stock that there's now reduced demand for. "I don't think anyone will say that they expect the market to grow, that's for sure," concludes Gavin. There might be trouble ahead...

The economic crises around the world have affected all areas of guitar production. And these increased costs present a difficult business decision for manufacturers...

INTRODUCING

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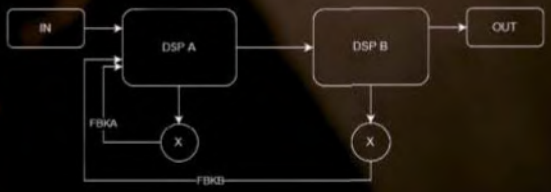

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MAINSTREAM ELECTRICS

Irresistible builds from both sides of the pond

Words: Dave Burrluck

Cream T Crossfire

Cream T started off as just pickup makers, but its guitars – made by the new-venture UK Guitar Builders in York – are attracting attention, too, especially since they feature pickup-swapping technology, licensed from Relish Guitars in Switzerland. First off we got the Aurora, co-designed by Billy Gibbons, while this Crossfire offset swaps the style, notably with its lightweight obeche body. But it's the unfussy craft that most impresses: a beautifully made boutique-level guitar with some of the best necks in production anywhere in the world. Add in those swappable Cream T (or, indeed, other brand) pickups and you have a hugely versatile proposition.

Price: ***From £1,799*** *Website:* ***www.creamtpickupsdirect.com***

Gibson SG Standard '61 Faded Maestro Vibrola

The return of Gibson's Faded series was a bit of a surprise this year, but the new trio – a 50s and 60s Les Paul, and this SG – certainly impressed with their virtual lack of finish and prices that are reduced by almost 10 per cent over the current gloss-finished models. Finish aside, there are no changes to the current specifications, but with its ultra-thin cherry stained finish it was this SG that got us really excited: very cleanly made, lightweight and really good-sounding. It's raw, vibrant and quintessentially rock 'n' roll. "The SG has earned its stripes on countless stages and classic recordings," we said, "and this one is a beaut."

Price: ***£1,899*** *Website:* ***www.gibson.com***

PJD Carey Apprentice

Classed by PJD as a "streamlined" version of its best-selling Carey model, the Apprentice could also be described as a boutique-level, bolt-on 'Junior'. It's also PJD's first single-pickup guitar and the first to use obeche for its solid body. Originally a 12-piece limited run in either 3 Tone Tear Drop Burst (as pictured) or Butterscotch, the second wave is available in Soda, Berry, Black and Forest Green, limited to 12 of each colour – all lightly aged high-gloss nitro. We get a new Cream T Apprentice 59 soapbar single coil, too, especially designed for the guitar, and that superb quarter-sawn roasted maple neck. We said: "A very stable working instrument and a great example of stellar UK guitar craft."

Price: ***£1,950*** *Website:* ***www.pjdguitars.com***

MOD SQUAD

Build Your Own *by Dave Burrluck*

"I'm not sure I should be saying that the most fun I've had this year was making the lowly £165 Offset Trem kit guitar from StewMac... but, there, I've said it. It took a fair bit of time, and yet with the finish barely dry I've already started using it on a recording. Yes, I'm lucky enough to have some proper guitars made by proper guitar makers, but there's something rather inspiring about this basic but effective offset kit, particularly since you can add your own custom touches. Aside from the opportunity to hone your modding skills, it's an ongoing project: I've already swapped the pickups and upgraded the tuners, not to mention the circuit.

"With a build such as this, hopefully you'll also get to learn new techniques. And with some personal advice from PJD's Leigh Dovey and boutique builder Seth Baccus on domestic finishing, I'd like to think I've raised my own game. I mean, take the installation of those side-dot markers – that's something I hadn't done for, probably, at least 30 years!"

Fender American Vintage II 1951 Telecaster

Another well anticipated launch this year was Fender's American Vintage II, which replaces the American Original models in the company's expansive range. It's a return to year-specific instruments after the decade-specific American Originals, so, along with our pictured 1951, other Telecasters are the 1963, 1972 Thinline, 1975 Deluxe and 1977 Custom.

On the Strat front we get a 1957, 1961 and 1973, then there's a lone 1966 Jazzmaster offset. Our review samples – the 1951 Tele and 1961 Strat – were extremely impressive with narrow/tall frets on the original 184mm (7.25-inch) radiused fingerboards. Finish is nitro where appropriate; the 70s models use gloss polyurethane, and three-bolt neck joins. Pure Vintage pickups are used across the range and, of course, those Wide Range humbucking Teles use Fender's authentic CuNiFe magnetic polepieces.

"Fender has absolutely nailed these two," concluded our review. "The guitars are built to supreme levels of craftsmanship; they play beautifully and sound amazing, just what a great Strat and Tele should be... And if you're someone who has struggled with the whole 'bash 'em up a bit' relic thing, then these guitars are most definitely for you. They're pristine and gorgeous – we'd challenge even the fabled Custom Shop to do it better."

Price: ***£2,219*** *Website:* ***www.fender.com***

PRESTIGE ELECTRICS

The flawless electrics that reside at the peak of guitar design in 2022

Words: *Dave Burrluck*

CHARVEL GUTHRIE GOVAN SIGNATURE MJ SAN DIMAS SD24 CM

Guthrie Govan's relationship with Charvel USA is long running, and for 2022 a new, more affordable Japanese-made model proves his recipe works wherever it's made. The body is basswood with a thin ash veneer facing, and the neck is carbon-reinforced roasted maple with some jumbo stainless-steel frets. The vibrato system is superb, too, with a locking bridge, locking tuners and a slippery Graph Tech Tusq XL nut, while the Charvel HSH pickups and some tricky 'single coil' switching provide the voice. Or should we say voices? We commented that it's "a perfectly aimed working tool that covers vast amounts of ground".

Price: ***£2,449*** *Website:* ***www.charvel.com***

MANSON ORYX VI

Manson might be known for its spectacular builds for Matt Bellamy, but the ORYX (available as both six- and seven-strings) adds a different spin to its catalogue. Co-designed by head luthier, Tim Stark, with Adam 'Nolly' Getgood, the ORYX has quite a sleek, modernist design and features many considered touches: the fingerboard is Richlite with stainless-steel frets, while the custom-designed three-position Free-Way blade selector switch rocks between series and parallel humbucking. Pickups are Nolly's signature Bare Knuckle Polymath 'buckers, and while aimed at the contemporary high-gain rock/metal player, there's a lot more to them – and the ORYX – than that.

Price: ***£2,899*** *Website:* ***www.mansonguitarworks.com***

PATRICK JAMES EGGLE MACON SC GOLDTOP

With over three decades of both electric and acoustic guitar-making experience, Patrick James Eggle might well be considered a national treasure of the guitar world. His take on the single-cut has graced these pages on many occasions, but every one we've played has been nothing short of extraordinary. Here, under the Aztec gold nitro top finish is a lightly 'honeycomb' chambered genuine mahogany body; the beautifully carved 'fat C' neck is topped with a Santos rosewood fingerboard. This beauty is powered by Cream T GT 57 humbuckers scanned from another Brit legend, Geoff Whitehorn's 57 Goldtop.

Price: ***£5,440*** *Website:* ***www.eggle.co.uk***

MY YEAR IN GEAR

SURPRISE ADDITION *by Neville Marten*

"I've deliberately tried to tame my gear purchasing this year. However, on top of the unintended acquisition of a '56 Tom Murphy aged Goldtop, this happened... I had no intention of changing my '63 ES-335 Reissue. But I was in World Guitars recently and they had two dot-neck sunbursts, a '59 and a '61. They reminded me of the original '61 I let go years back and, nonchalantly trying each one, I instantly preferred the '61. It didn't have the mega-skinny neck of my oldie, but a really nice taper on it made me feel completely at home. "Go on, plug it in," coaxed WG owner, Jules. Straight into the house Matchless DC-30 (a cunning trap if ever there was one!) it sounded immense. "It's got Gibson's MHS low-wind Custom Buckers," he explained. I couldn't put it down, and in an hour had decided on the swap. The dot neck wasn't new, and my red one had been round the block (sic!), but we struck a deal and now I'm the proud owner. I'm sure you'll be seeing it soon!"

Seth Baccus Shoreline JM-H90

As the stepson of legendary luthier Andy Manson, Seth Baccus grew up around guitars. In the past decade his solo builds have garnered much praise and respect, and after teaming up with the UK Guitar Builders team, Seth's instruments are now much more available, not least from mainstream stockists such as Andertons.

The first model to be introduced in this fashion is the bolt-on Shoreline, and to say Seth has pushed the level of quality from UKGB is an understatement. The ultra-flamed roasted neck with its silky oil and wax finish might be the sole reason you fall for its charms, but the lightweight build (using obeche, which he introduced to the UKGB team) and lively resonant response are simply first-class. You can order the guitar in a wide range of colours, lightly aged if you want, and the JM-H90 uses Bare Knuckle pickups: a Mule humbucker at the bridge and a Blue Note P90 at the neck.

"It is getting on for Fender Custom Shop money," we said in our review, "particularly if you were to indulge in some of the available options, but it holds its own in that company or with pretty much any top-level instrument out there. We can only imagine what the future holds."

Price: ***£3,399*** *Website:* ***sethbaccus.com***

ACOUSTIC GUITARS

This selection has both pleased our ears and warmed our hearts over the past 12 months

Words: *David Mead*

Córdoba Stage

The nylon-string Cordoba Stage is a hybrid instrument designed for live use and so its (good) looks fall well outside those of a conventional 'classical' guitar. It has a finger-friendly reduced-width 'board, a 406mm (16-inch) radius and classy soundports on the upper bout. The spruce top sits atop a chambered mahogany body, while the mahogany neck sports a slightly rounded heel to aid upper-fret access and comfort. Its crossover style will also appeal to steel-string acoustic and electric players, feeling familiar under the hands. A mix of under-saddle pickup and body sensors ensures that all your nylon-string needs are catered for; it delivers an almost mic'd up, natural-sounding portfolio.

Price: ***£625*** ***Website:*** ***www.cordobaguitars.com***

Cort Flow-OC

We keep saying that guitars hailing from China these days never cease to impress and Cort's Flow-OC is no exception. The Cor-Tek plants in China and Indonesia also manufacture instruments for the likes of PRS and Manson, Cort being the house brand, and the quality here is typically outstanding. This little OM features a cedar top with mahogany body and walnut-reinforced mahogany neck. Onstage duties are ably performed by an LR Baggs Anthem pickup with discrete preamp controls in the soundhole. We found a superbly balanced tone with good trebles, mids and basses, describing it as being "polite, demure and generally well-behaved", and the OM size is eminently comfortable for sitting or standing.

Price: ***£1,149*** ***Website:*** ***www.cortguitars.com***

Furch Yellow Deluxe GC-CR

The Czech Republic's Furch company has been causing ripples among acoustic players for many years now and its reputation will no doubt be enhanced with this model. Featuring a Grand Concert body shape with a Western red cedar top and Indian rosewood back and sides, it charmed us with its comfortable soft V neck and broad tonal spectrum. Above and beyond its puppyish willingness to please, we also applauded the technology beneath its exterior – for instance, the 3D printed comfort bevels and Furch's Composite Neck Reinforcement system, which represent steps forward in terms of acoustic guitar construction. Forward thinking, innovative and, most importantly, tonally rich.

Price: ***€2,758*** ***Website:*** ***https://furchguitars.com***

I LEARNED FROM THAT

Tuning In *by David Mead*

"One of the more important lessons that I have learned with playing acoustic guitar is to be brave when it comes to experimenting with alternative tunings. It's always tempting to believe that if you retune your guitar you're right back on the nursery slopes, learning new chord shapes and scale fingerings. But I found that taking a leap of faith and just experimenting 'blind' opened the doors to a new level of creativity. It forced me away from established moves and favourite chord patterns, and made me search for chord shapes and melodic ideas that were suggested by my ears rather than opting for well-trodden paths. The maths of any new tuning – working out chord shapes and so on – can come later. It's not as difficult as we imagine. After all, DADGAD means retuning only three strings; the fifth, fourth and third strings remain familiar ground. So be brave, it's a journey worth taking."

Taylor 724ce Koa

Taylor's commitment to a more ecological approach regarding the use of timbers in its guitars is exemplified in its new koa-bodied 700 Series. Koa is a honey-coloured wood that comes from Hawaii, and a few years ago Taylor secured its own plantation in the islands in order to ensure the highest possible standards of reforestation alongside regulated use. The company's use of koa in its instruments is by no means new, but recent innovations in bracing techniques under the supervision of chief designer, CEO and president Andy Powers have all come together with the 724ce and 722ce (pictured) models. Speaking of his own regard for koa, Andy told us: "It's absolutely stunningly beautiful. Even as I walk toward a chunk of koa, before I can touch it, before I can hear it, before I can smell it, I can see it from a long distance away and it strikes me as one of the most beautiful of all woods." We agree wholeheartedly as the 724ce knocked our socks off, not only with its stunning good looks but with the rich, warm tones that emerged from it and its practically effortless playability, too. "Beautifully built, it plays like butter and sounds strong, balanced and poised," we said. We were enchanted and unanimously declared it to be an award-winner.

***Price:** £3,799 **Website:** www.taylorguitars.com*

A YEAR IN GUITAR

THE ACOUSTIC PARADOX

Are there times when a top-of-the-range acoustic guitar is just *too* good to use for the job in hand?

Words: David Mead

Back in the days when I was teaching guitar for a living, I had a student called Melanie who was into acoustic blues. In fact, her chosen period of the blues was very specific – pre-1940s country blues and, in particular, Robert Johnson. Prior to the lessons she took with me she had bought herself a good acoustic guitar. I can't remember the make, but I thought it was totally fit for purpose. However, Melanie had a problem with it that took us a few weeks to unravel. She was listening to a lot of pre-war country blues and she said that she just couldn't get the right sound from her guitar.

At first, I couldn't understand what she meant as her guitar sounded fine to my ears. But then she came in one evening and said she'd sorted the problem by putting light-gauge electric guitar strings on her acoustic. This naturally resulted in a significant loss of bass and midrange, giving the guitar a much thinner, more trebly sound. I thought it sounded completely wrong, but she was happy, despite my opinion that what she was basing her guitar sound on was down to the limitations of 1930s recording techniques, and that if Robert Johnson had appeared in the room with us clutching a Gibson acoustic she would have been amazed at how powerful and bassy the sound actually was. As I said, though, she was happy and I decided to leave well alone, kind of hoping that she'd change her mind as she advanced further with her studies.

I related this tale to my colleague Neville Marten in the *Guitarist* office. Both of us are lucky enough to own prestige acoustic guitars. I have a Fylde Falstaff Custom with an Engelmann spruce top and Brazilian rosewood back and sides, and Nev has a Martin D-28 Authentic 1937 with an Adirondack spruce top and Madagascan rosewood back and sides. Both are cannons, acoustically speaking, with amazing projection, complex overtones and a dynamic range that go from a whisper to a roar without sacrificing any tonal integrity whatsoever. Some acoustics will 'thin out' when played softly or distort if played hard, but not these two. Like the master crafted instruments they both undoubtedly are, they handle just about everything you throw at them with consummate ease.

When my Fylde first came into my possession in 2009 it was like nothing I'd ever played before. The fact that it was so good was a little scary, and it was a while before I felt totally at home with it. In fact, Dominic Miller's comments in this issue (see page 116) about a good guitar sometimes being like a wild animal that you have to learn how to tame sums up the situation perfectly. Everything I played sounded so huge I had to learn how to rein it in: the amazing sustain meant I had to learn to selectively damp notes, the increased dynamics meant that I had to know when to hold back. The learning curve was pretty steep.

But here's the thing. I wouldn't take my Fylde out on a blues gig – neither would Nev take his D-28 out on a similar mission – because, just as my student Melanie had found, they're simply not raucous, earthy and, dare I say, crude enough. While both models cover most things that we need, there are some areas of music for which they're just completely inappropriate.

It took David some time to adjust to his Fylde Falstaff Custom – a veritable "cannon" of an acoustic

While [our high-end] models cover most things that we need, there are some areas of music for which they're just completely inappropriate

For a while this bothered me. I found myself thinking that my Falstaff Custom is a first-class instrument, it should be able to handle any gig, but then I had to conclude that, paradoxically, sometimes a good guitar is just *too* good. After all, you don't always need a Bösendorfer Grand, sometimes all you need is a simple upright piano.

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AMPS

Portable power with vintage tone, modern features or both – you're spoilt for choice

Words: Nick Guppy

POSITIVE GRID SPARK MINI

Positive Grid's Spark Mini isn't just about bringing digital modelling to the masses, although it does that perfectly well. For guitarists who mostly play at home, either for internet broadcasting or just for fun, big loud amplifiers aren't necessary and can often be a disadvantage, as most big amps – especially valve ones – are designed to sound good at the kind of volume levels that would cause friction with even the best of neighbours. The Spark Mini's clever speaker design does a good job of creating stadium tone at bedroom-friendly volume. Combined with the Smart Jam app and ToneCloud online preset library, it's really great fun to use, which is what it's surely all about.

***Price:* £219 *Website:* www.positivegrid.com**

FENDER PRO JUNIOR IV SE 1X10 COMBO

Fender's excellent Pro Junior IV SE is a great little amp that's been upgraded and tweaked to make it more reliable and usable than its predecessors, with much-improved circuit boards and modified volume and tone controls for wider tonal range. A pair of EL84 output valves driving a single 10-inch loudspeaker make the Pro Junior ideal for small gigs, home use, recording and rehearsals – in fact, just about anything. Aimed at everyone from beginners looking for their first 'real' guitar amp to touring professionals, the Pro Junior also sounds great with pedals, responding really well to overdrives. Best of all, though, you can pick one up for around £400 or less – it's amazing value for money.

***Price:* £399 *Website:* www.fender.com**

PRS HDRX 20 HEAD

Paul Reed Smith's amplifiers have gone from strength to strength, with heads and combos covering the more affordable end of the market up to the sort of price tags more often associated with PRS. The company's new HDRX 20 head is a smaller version of the mighty HDRX heads, which are intended to exactly reproduce the sound of one of Jimi Hendrix's original 1959 Marshall Super Lead tops. Detailed research and a close-up examination of the actual amp allegedly used by Hendrix at Woodstock has resulted in a unique amplifier that's an excellent pedal platform and is packed with chewy, low-to-mid gain tonal variation. Built in PRS's SE factory in Indonesia, the HDRX 20 is also attainably priced.

***Price:* £799 *Website:* www.prsguitars.com**

MOD SQUAD

RICKENBACKER REWIRE *by Huw Price*

"I'd be the first to admit that my Rickenbacker knowledge could be better, so when I was asked to replace a Fireglo 330's pickups and reconfigure the control wiring to vintage spec it was an absolute revelation. The owner provided a pair of Creamery Toaster-style pickups, a set of Bare Knuckle's potentiometers with the correct values, and a push-pull pot to make the bridge pickup's preset bass roll-off switchable.

"I do like Rickenbacker's High Gain pickups, but the 'Toaster Tops' and bass-cut revealed why none of the Rickies I'd played had ever reproduced the classic tones of those 60s records. The rewired Rickenbacker jangled and chimed, occupying its own frequency space while leaving ample room for vocals, keyboards and bass. Blending the two pickups through my Vox AC10, it was unmistakeably 'that sound' [hear it here: https://bit.ly/huwricky]. I'm now fighting the urge to buy a Rickenbacker of my own."

www.huwpriceguitar.com

Blackstar
St James EL34 1x12 Combo

In recent years we've seen many guitar amplification designs leveraging Class D technology to produce lots of watts from unfeasibly small packages. However, it's still generally accepted that higher-powered valve amps continue to be heavy and cumbersome. Blackstar's St James range changed that perception overnight, with two pairs of full-on 50-watt valve heads and combos driven by a choice of EL34 or 6L6 output stages, which you can pick up with one finger.

Named for the district of Northampton, Blackstar's hometown, the St James is one of the most exciting new products we've seen in a long time, with a list of innovations including a patent-applied-for switched mode power supply and exclusive Celestion Zephyr loudspeakers, which all add up to make the St James the lightest 50-watt all-valve amps in the world. They're no lightweights when it comes to tone, though, with a medium-gain British-voiced preamp in the EL34 version and a high-gain USA-inspired 6L6 equivalent. Add Blackstar's Cab Rig speaker emulation technology with a built-in reactive load for silent recording/quiet stages, and you've got a great-sounding, highly portable combo that you can take and use anywhere. Definitely one of the major highlights of 2022.

Price: ***£1,099*** *Website:* ***www.blackstaramps.com***

FLOOR AMPS & MULTI-EFFECTS

Compact tone from world-class amps-in-boxes and feature-packed multi-effects processors

Words Trevor Curwen & Nick Guppy

TC Electronic Plethora X3 TonePrint Pedalboard

A more compact version of the X5 multi-effects pedal, the X3 has all the same effects onboard, but its 127 presets (known as 'pedalboards') give access to three footswitchable effects at one time. There's a choice of 16 effects available to assign to each of the footswitches – either different pedals or multiples of the same type – and each pedal can be loaded with a TonePrint (basically an edited set of parameters) from those stored onboard. Its small footprint makes it an ideal way to add multiple pedals to your rig in one go. Alternatively, you'd only need to add your own dirt pedal to have a completely portable, self-contained minimalist rig.

***Price:** £299 **Website:** www.tcelectronic.com*

Boss GX-100

It might have plenty in common with the units in Boss's long-running GT series, but the GX-100 sits apart from those by being the first Boss floor processor with a touchscreen. There are 300 memory slots onboard, with amp models and effects derived from the GT-1000, including 23 AIRD amplifiers and over 150 effects. With built-in audio interface and headphone jack, what you're getting is a superb do-it-all companion piece for any guitar that you can use for recording, silent practice or straight into a PA or FRFR speaker, as well as in front of your amp. It continues the GT tradition with the bonus of being far easier to set up courtesy of that touchscreen.

***Price:** £499 **Website:** www.boss.info*

Victory V4 The Jack amplifier

Victory's V4 'The Jack' combines a unique valve preamp with a whopping 180 watts of Class D power and Two Notes DynIR speaker emulation into a head the size of a large paperback, which can either sit on a speaker cabinet, or alongside your other stompboxes in a pedalboard. Inspired by the full-size amps designed for guitar polymath Guthrie Govan, The Jack is highly versatile, with two footswitchable channels that go from Tweed-inspired cleans and crunches, through to soaring, vocal lead sounds. The Two Notes virtual cabs mean you can plug into a PA or studio desk anywhere and get great tone with minimal fuss, making Victory's V4 'The Jack' a serious professional tool.

***Price:** £799 **Website:** www.victoryamps.com*

MY YEAR IN GEAR

DIY Is A-OK

by Nick Guppy

"I'd been thinking about building a Dumble-style overdrive pedal kit for some time and dipped a toe in the water earlier this year with DIY specialists Jeds Peds (www.jedspeds.co.uk). Deliberately restricting myself to soldering a few components each evening was occasionally frustrating, but after a couple of weeks and a few seconds of plugging guitar and amp into the wrong sockets (apparently everyone does this), my Symbolisation kit came to life first time and sounds great, much better than expected.

"I can see why pedal-kit building has become so popular; it's a totally absorbing hobby for players who want to improve their soldering skills, rewarded with a satisfying sense of achievement on successful completion. My build experience was further enriched by the Jeds Peds Facebook community, a global resource full of friendly banter, knowledge and enthusiasm. I'll admit it, I've become hooked and I'm currently enjoying choosing my 2023 project."

Universal Audio UAFX
Ruby '63 Top Boost Amplifier

Universal Audio has been on a stompbox roll recently. Following a trio of effects last year, the company has condensed the sound and features of three classic amps into three stompboxes. There's one for Fender Tweed sounds (UAFX Woodrow '55 Instrument Amplifier) and one for Fender black-panel Deluxe sounds (UAFX Dream '65 Reverb Amplifier), but our winner today is the Ruby – which may just be the best digital recreation of AC30 sound we've heard to date. It's certainly the one with the most tactile control surface, authentically reflecting the real thing. Three variations on the sound combine with a choice of six speaker cabinet emulations (easily disengaged for use with an amp) for instantly familiar classic tones, all with a Room knob that adds realistic ambience. Two variations are based on a '63 Top Boost amp: a Brilliant channel complete with an EP-3 preamp to push it, and a Vibrato channel with clean boost and Speed and Intensity controls for the throbby tremolo. The Normal channel is based on a non-TB '61 amp complete with a Rangemaster treble boost dialled in. Best of all, though, is the playability as the pedal reacts organically with all of the push-and-pull response of a real Vox amp.

***Price:** £355 **Website:** www.uaudio.com*

DRIVE EFFECTS

Dirt in its many forms reaches a practical pinnacle this year

Words: *Trevor Curwen*

BOSS WAZA CRAFT DS-1W

The longest-running and best-selling Boss compact pedal has received the Waza Craft treatment. While the pedal still retains its original scooped-mid distortion sound in Standard mode, it adds a new Custom mode with a different tonal profile, featuring a thicker and more prominent midrange for real presence in the mix when kicked in. This is aided by the fact that it's also a welcome 6dB louder, offering more scope in placement of the Level knob for boost. In addition, this mode features an increased sensitivity leading to a more dynamic and nuanced playing experience. You can still buy a DS-1 in its original form, but for versatility this version is a no-brainer, even at almost twice the price.

Price: ***£125*** ***Website:*** ***www.roland.co.uk***

J ROCKETT EL HOMBRE

El hombre (the man) in question here is ZZ Top's Billy Gibbons, and while aiming to give you some of his classic tones, this pedal from J Rockett has a flexibility that goes beyond Texas blues 'n' boogie. Compact and robust, it has standard Volume and Gain knobs, but its tone control is labelled 'Bite', reflecting its influence on the overdrive's top-end presence for delivering something cutting and bright, or dialling it back for altogether smoother tones. There's a very wide range of gain on offer here, from low-level grit right through to the roar of a cranked 'Plexi'. In between those two extremes you'll find all shades of drive, playable with bags of amp-like dynamic response.

Price: ***£185*** ***Website:*** ***www.rockettpedals.com***

THERMION STONE AGE

If you're looking for variety, you'll often find lots of different fuzz models in your average digital multi-effects, but are they going to hold their own next to the real transistorised analogue beast? Probably not. So what about a genuine analogue pedal that will give you that variety? That's what you get with the Stone Age – a three-footswitch stompbox that comes loaded with 10 silicon transistors and packs four different fuzz engines, including a single transistor one as well as Thermion's takes on Maestro FZ-1, Fuzz Face and Big Muff sounds. Footswitches that bring in an octave and add clean sound increase the versatility of the Stone Age, a comprehensive fuzz facilitator.

Price: ***£249*** ***Website:*** ***www.thermion.com***

I LEARNED FROM THAT

NEW BLOOD *by Trevor Curwen*

"I have to be honest, getting to play with the cream of the best stompbox releases, even if it's just for a few days in many instances, is a bit of a dream job at any time. But this year has been exceptional with the variety and quality that's coming from both mainstream and smaller boutique manufacturers.

"If there's any theme running through the last year, it's perhaps two-pronged. On the one hand there are companies that want to push the boundaries between genres, and that's generally been in the area of ambient effects with the likes of Walrus Audio's Slötvå and Lore making our GOTY shortlist.

The main theme, though, seems to be a revival of classic effects and amp sounds from the past. Pedal makers are presenting them in a new, improved context, accurately recreating the sonic fingerprint while providing a practicality for modern players that the originals lacked, typified perhaps by the Boss RE-202 (celebrated over the page)."

MXR Custom Shop
CSP039 Duke of Tone

Plenty of players would like to get their hands on an Analog Man King Of Tone, the twin-channel stompbox based on heavily modded circuitry from the Marshall Bluesbreaker pedal. But you can't just go out and buy one: there's currently a waiting list about five years long and it has to be imported from the US. The single-channel Prince Of Tone, released in small batches, is perhaps a bit easier to get hold of, but it's by no means a quick purchase. The great news now, then, is that you can now simply shop at your local retailer for this year's winner in the Drive category, as MXR has collaborated with Analog Man and released the Duke Of Tone.

A single-channel pedal not dissimilar in format to the Prince Of Tone, the Duke offers toggle-switched Boost, Overdrive and Distortion modes that are controlled with Volume, Drive and Tone knobs. Yes, it's mass-market, but no compromises seem to have been made in a pedal that will deliver the sound and playability of the boutique Analog Man options, whether that be clean boost, natural airy low-level drive, or the harder clipping and compression of distortion mode. This is a versatile, transparent boost or drive pedal that's practically sized to slot into any setup.

***Price:** £179 **Website:** www.jimdunlop.com*

DELAY & MODULATION EFFECTS

Blasts from pedalboards past get an update for today's player with groundbreaking tech

Words: *Trevor Curwen*

Line 6 DL4 MkII

If it ain't broke don't fix it. But if it's 20-odd years old, how about a little refresh? That seems to be Line 6's philosophy with this new iteration of its DL4 delay, staying true to the original version but bringing it right up to date. It basically keeps the same knob and footswitch array of the original – the default being to have three different delays instantly available with a tap tempo footswitch to set the timing – and it also retains all of its delay models while adding an extra 15 new ones and additional options to mix reverb with delay. The old trouper now has sounds and features to rival the contemporary competition while retaining an easy familiarity.

Price: ***£249*** ***Website:*** ***www.line6.com***

Walrus Audio Mako M1

There's nothing wrong with having a whole bunch of modulation effects under your feet, but they can take up quite a bit of room, they require several power outlets and audio cables – plus, the cost of individual pedals can quickly mount up. That's where a unit such as this scores. Walrus's High-Fidelity Modulation Machine keeps all your modulations in one place (as long as you use one effect at a time) with recallable presets and a single power cable, and it's not prohibitively expensive. Walrus has hit the spot with these effects, and there's an impressive amount of adjustability, too. Okay, there's no flanger, but you get a great range of chorus, phaser, tremolo, vibrato, rotary and filter options.

Price: ***£319*** ***Website:*** ***www.walrusaudio.com***

J Rockett Uni-Verb

We can picture the design meeting at J Rockett's HQ: "Let's do a version of a Uni-Vibe." "Sure, but we can't call it that..." "How about we combine it with reverb so we can name it Uni-Verb?" Genius. The end result is a very fine-sounding Uni-Vibe clone and a realistic-sounding digital recreation of a spring reverb all in the same chassis with separate footswitches for each, and a send and return loop providing options (besides having them serially adjacent) for using them to top and tail your 'board with a bunch of pedals in between, or via a loop switcher for maximum convenience. "Two classic vintage flavours packaged together practically," we said.

Price: ***£465*** ***Website:*** ***www.rockettpedals.com***

MOD SQUAD

Sounding 'Board *by Rod Brakes*

"I keep telling myself it's fine to own multiple pedalboards. I admit I've got it bad, but they make life so much easier and they're a cinch to put together these days. Plus, I'm far more likely to use a pedal if it's simply a case of plugging in a 'board, rather than going through the rigmarole of hooking them all up from scratch. It's the same reason I tend to leave guitars out of their cases: you never know when inspiration might strike. Justifications aside, my latest build is one of the best pedalboards I've owned. Powered by The GigRig gear and hooked up with Evidence Audio cables, the sublime Boss Space Echo RE-202, addictive Dinosaural Cogmeister, ultra-rare Fryer Fuzz FGD-1, and gorgeous Mile End Julep (one of my favourite discoveries this year) are fixed to a Pedaltrain Classic JR using a couple of their very handy PT-PB2 height-boosters on the back row."

Boss Space Echo RE-202

Back in the early 1980s, before digital had really taken an affordable mainstream hold, this reviewer used to do gigs with a Roland Space Echo sitting on top of his amp controlled by a plastic triple footswitch that had status LEDs retrofitted by a tech. It worked because it had to, but was hardly a stress-free, convenient option with head cleaning and tape replacement in the equation. The important thing, though, was that it had the sound.

Now, you can have *that* sound combined with ultra convenience as Boss has forensically examined the original analogue sonics, recreated them with new digital algorithms, and put that into a three-footswitch stompbox. The RE-202's control surface mirrors the exact knob layout of an RE-201 but goes further with a range of parameters that mimic the idiosyncrasies of the tape medium and its transport mechanism. It also expands the sounds by having four virtual heads, rather than three, and you get presets, tap tempo and footswitch-initiated performance effects. This does all those great single-head echoes covering plenty of playing applications, but it's the complexity of its rhythmic patterns that make a multi-head machine special – and this nails it. A landmark release.

Price: *£339* ***Website:*** *www.roland.co.uk*

A YEAR IN GUITAR

EXTRA, SPECIAL

We devote so much thought to big gear purchases – but it's the little things that make the difference from day to day, we argue

Words: Jamie Dickson

When acoustic became pretty much my main focus, I started trying to get more performance out of my Yamaha dreadnought and the Martin that followed. I must have tried 20 different types of acoustic string, by different makers. Ernie Ball's Paradigm Phosphor Bronze set (£19.99) impressed on whatever I tried them on. They just seemed to have 'more' of everything across the frequency spectrum, going some way to justifying their high price. Later, I also came to appreciate Elixir's Nanoweb Phosphor Bronze 13-53 set (also £19.99), primarily because their protective coating reduces finger squeaks dramatically and they sound great. True, both sets of strings were pricey, but given the importance of strings to an acoustic's voice, the investment was worth it.

And herein lies an important point. Not all that many people can afford Custom Shop instruments – but most of us can afford to buy quality when it comes to accessories and consumables, and we *may* hear and feel almost as much benefit by doing so as when we splash out on bigger-ticket items such as hand-wound pickups and so on. Using top-quality accessories with an affordable guitar is arguably the cheapest way to get high-end feel and finesse into your rig and with no intrusive mods.

Also, the relative cheapness of strings and picks and such means we may be more willing to experiment with buying different kinds – learning more about tone on the way. On the electric side, I've found that anything with a Fender-style 25.5-inch scale works brilliantly with 0.009.5 to 0.044-gauge strings on: to me, it offers the ideal compromise between a pliant string tension and having enough sonic heft to each note. Right now, Curt Mangan's Fusion-Matched Nickel Wound set (£11.99) is the best I've tried; the lovely polished feel really enhances the playing experience and they sound great – also check out D'Addario's NYXL, which is available in 0.009.5 to 0.044 sets.

While premium-quality strings are probably something most can afford, other accessories are a little bit more of an investment – but may offer you new ways to fine-tune tone. A good example is the Axe Custom Cables Super Cable (from £75), which features a variable capacitance dial on the jack you plug into the guitar. This lets you subtly tweak its bright/dark voicing to suit the guitar you're playing. More than just a tone control, it emphasises certain frequencies and we found it was a great way to adjust your guitar's voice to really 'click' with the rest of your rig. Anyone who uses multiple guitars and amps would find it well worth a try.

Picks also have a bigger influence on tone and playability than many give credit for – and, again, you may find premium picks offer something new in terms of playing satisfaction, articulation and tone. There are myriad options to try but standouts tried this year at *Guitarist* include the Jim Dunlop Primetone series, made of its Ultex material, in both smooth and gripped styles. We particularly liked the Dunlop Primetone Standard 2.5mm Grip Pick (£11.69 for a three-pack), which had a nice polished, poised feel in use. We also liked the grippy, semi-matt feel and ultra-precise articulation of Ernie Ball's 1.5mm Black Standard Prodigy picks (£12.79 for an eight pack).

While some accessories don't contribute directly to tone, they certainly add a little something to the experience of owning and playing your guitar. Here at *Guitarist*, we've been very impressed with the leathercraft of Pinegrove Straps, based up in Shropshire and offering top-notch handcrafted straps that look and feel really special, down to the creak of high-quality leather. I liked the 50s-inspired, rockabilly style Pinegrove Shoulder Pad straps (from £65), but they make a wide range of padded and solid leather styles. If top-quality straps are your thing, also check out Heistercamp down in Devon, Souldier straps of Chicago and Munich-based Epivo.

Top-quality accessories with an affordable guitar is arguably the cheapest way to get high-end feel and finesse into your rig and with no intrusive mods

Finally, when it comes to cases, we've been seriously impressed with the hybrid gigbag/hardcase 'gig shell' concept made by Wolfmeister in Australia. They're by no means cheap, but the level of protection for a treasured guitar in a semi-rigid case that's almost as portable as a gigbag is really impressive, thanks to the innovative use of stacked layers of alternately tough/shock-absorbing materials in their unique design. There are dozens of options in fabric and leather (various, from AUS $395) and they all look the business, too.

Elixir's Nanoweb strings (above) reduce finger-squeak and sound superb. Axe Custom Cables' Super Cable (top, middle) can really help dial your guitar in with different rigs. Quality straps by the likes of Heistercamp (bottom middle) and Pinegrove and premium cases by Wolfmeister (right) won't improve tone but will elevate the experience of using your guitar

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CHARLIE BURCHILL

He's the Glasgow guitar maverick who broke into the 80s stadium league with Simple Minds. Now, as the band return with 18th album, *Direction Of The Heart*, Charlie Burchill tells us about pushing the envelope, falling for the White Falcon, commandeering The Edge's rig, and why you won't catch him playing powerchords

Words Jamie Dickson & Henry Yates

Sparking Up

"My very first guitar, my mother got me when I was maybe nine. It's a true story – she bought me this guitar with coupons from Embassy cigarette packets! I started playing when I was about 12. I had two older brothers: one of them, he fancied playing guitar and bought a semi-decent one that I eventually nicked off him. He gave up and I carried on."

Local Heroes

"Jim [Kerr] and I, we joined Johnny And The Self Abusers in 1977. The punk scene was flourishing in Glasgow and it created so many opportunities for everybody. We didn't really come from a punk background – Jim and I were much more into The Doors, Velvet Underground and Roxy Music – but it was our doorway in. Sadly, it killed off a lot of older artists, but punk gave people the chance. Even if you weren't proficient, you could believe that you could actually play in a band. At the end of Johnny And The Self Abusers, Jim and I went on to start a new band, and that was Simple Minds."

Simple Pleasures

"My early Simple Minds rig was really simple. I was using a transistor Carlsbro, there wasn't a great deal of stuff going on. But I always had the delay – that was really important. We hooked up with a guy who worked with us for years, and he was a technical wizard who used to put together pedalboards for me with all sorts of different variations. We would just experiment. It was all a bit makeshift, but it got us to where we wanted to be."

High Flyer

"I never knew much about Gretsch, but in the early 80s, we started playing America and I came across the White Falcon. It's such a beautiful guitar, that was the original attraction. The White Falcon is not the easiest to play, but I realised that Gretsch is something that suited me because it speaks really well, no matter how distorted it is. With the older ones, you can hear how good they sound without even plugging in, and if it's good from the source then it's going to be good when it's amplified. Now I collect Gretsches and I've got a couple I still use today. But it's crazy to think that in 1982, White Falcons were $600..."

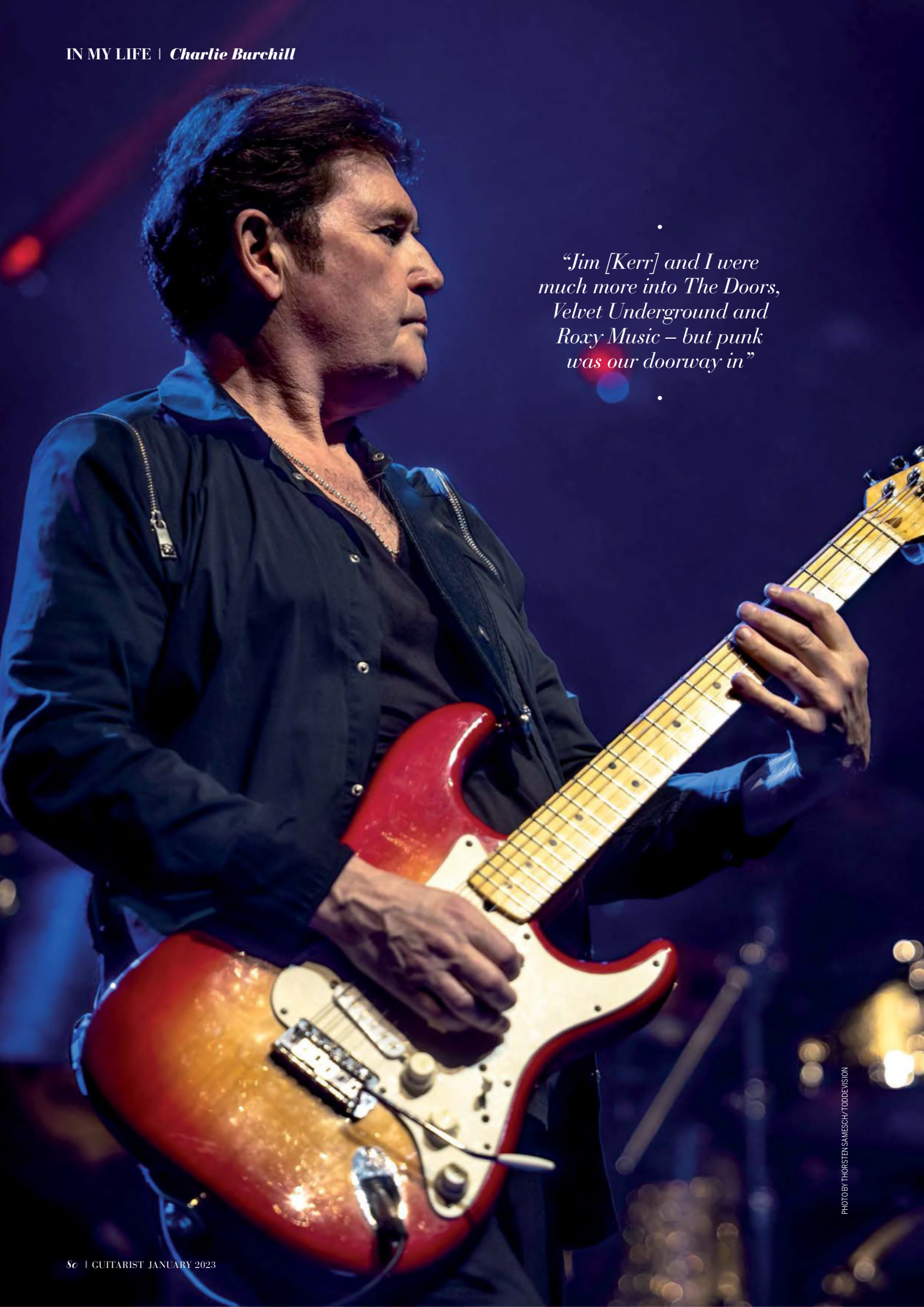
Sound & Vision

"I hated the straightforward guitar stuff. I never liked the idea of powerchords and just giving the song a bit of body. I was never a big fan of AOR American rock stuff. I was coming from a slightly more psychedelic background. Somebody like Robby Krieger in The Doors, he can play blues and he's playing what you could say is 'conventional' guitar, but when you go a bit deeper, you realise it's quite out-there, actually, and probably coming more from a slightly jazz background.

"Technology changed the game massively for guitar players. Suddenly, from being a guitar and an amp, three chords and the truth, you could go into a different realm completely. And as soon as I found effects, that's where I was going."

Coming Up

"Being on *The Old Grey Whistle Test* in 1979 was pretty daunting because it was a serious music programme, but it felt like we had arrived somewhere, finally. Looking back, we were dreadful, but there you go, that's just [how it is] at that age. It was very gradual, our success. We did have moments when it jumped a few levels, but by and large, it was always a work in progress. We were great mates and for the first part of the 80s we were really enjoying the travelling and being out of Glasgow. We had a great manager at the time, Bruce Findlay, who was like this father figure, making sure you kept your feet on the ground and didn't get [egotistical]."



"Jim [Kerr] and I were much more into The Doors, Velvet Underground and Roxy Music – but punk was our doorway in"

PHOTO BY THORSTEN SAMESCH/TODDEVISION

Double Or Quits

"In the early 80s, Arista [Records] were gonna drop us and we thought, 'Okay, this is where it gets really tough.' But we had a friend at Virgin who was pushing to get Branson to sign us. Eventually, they came up to Glasgow and signed us that afternoon. The first thing we gave them was *Sons And Fascination/Sister Feelings Call* [1981], which was a double album – which was at that time anathema to everybody. Not only that, it was quite abstract. They suggested we work with Steve Hillage, which was really out of the box because Steve was the prog guy from Gong and his own records. So we were thinking, 'How is that going to work?' But it was brilliant, actually, and it allowed us so much freedom. We had 18-minute songs that we edited down to three-and-a-half. It was quite a mad period. We never, ever stuck to the formula. And you could do that in those days. You couldn't do it now."

Pictured together in 1988, Charlie Burchill and Jim Kerr's band started out as punk outfit Johnny & The Self-Abusers in 1977

PHOTO BY PETE STILL/GETTY

'Paul Bearer

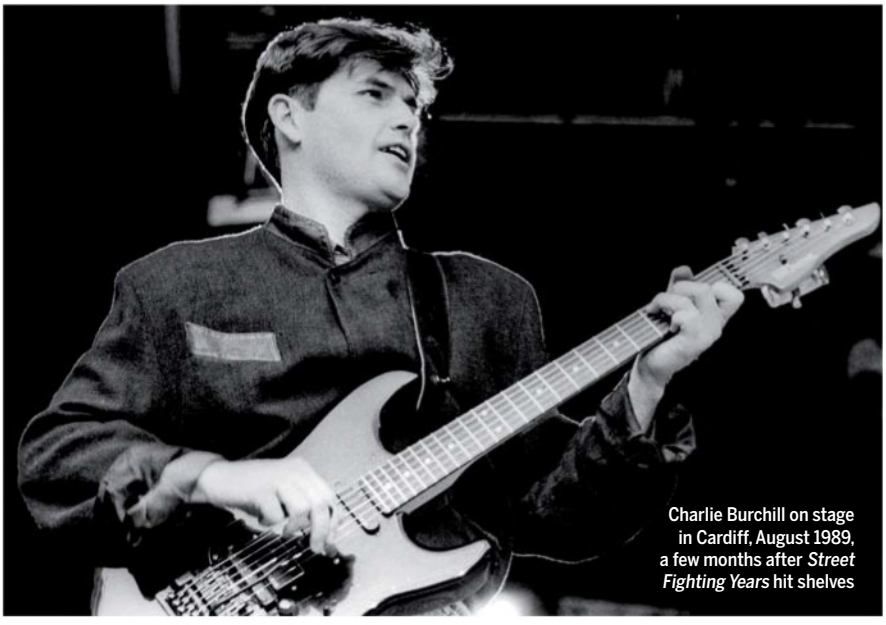
"The first band I ever saw play live was Led Zeppelin, so I had to get a Les Paul. Couldn't afford it, tried to make one – then I bought a copy. But the thing was, I didn't really know much about Les Pauls, in terms of the different years and what makes them good or bad. And it's very subjective because, actually, I quite like a lot of the heavier Les Pauls from the early 70s, which a lot of people don't like. But I play one live, which is an early 70s and I love it. Just a brilliant sound. A friend of mine bought a '59 in mint condition. The closest I've got to that was two of those Gibson '59 True Historic reissues. They're really great – I can only imagine what a real '59 is like."

Good Vintage

"I've got a lot of old Fenders, and the difference between a 50s Telecaster and something from the 70s is astronomical. Years ago, I brought a '55 Gretsch Duo Jet and when you pick it up, it's really light, it feels like something not that substantial, but it's just incredible. For me, I don't understand why people would buy new guitars when they could pick up a 60s Gretsch for the same money. It's mad. Personally, I would just go for a 60-something model and try to get something that isn't going to cost you the earth. Recently, like everything else, guitars have just got ridiculous, the vintage thing has got ridiculous. They've gone up at least 30 per cent for no reason. But y'know, I bought a '65 Country Gent for 1,500 quid and it's a fantastic guitar. And recently, I got a '62 Jaguar; it was refinished and, of course, that means the value's not there, but it's an amazing guitar."

Breakfast Of Champions

"We didn't write *Don't You (Forget About Me)*. The thing was, the record company had been on our back for a long time to do this song. It wasn't that we didn't like it. It was just that, at the time, we'd just written an album [1985's *Once Upon A Time*], we were going to work with Jimmy Iovine and we felt that we had real songs there – y'know, we had three Top 5 hits in the States from that album. So our nose was a bit out of joint that they were after this particular track that we didn't write. It was going to be in *The Breakfast Club* – a movie about American high school kids and detention, which we couldn't relate to. So we had a bit of an attitude about it. But then we met the guy who wrote it, Keith Forsey, and absolutely loved him. We just went with it, rattled the song out in an afternoon – and there you go, Murphy's law."



Charlie Burchill on stage in Cardiff, August 1989, a few months after *Street Fighting Years* hit shelves

PHOTO BY WESTERN MAIL ARCHIVE /MIRRORPIX/GETTY IMAGES

"The 80s was quite a mad period. We never, ever stuck to the formula. You couldn't do it now"

Close To The Edge

"When you look back, the 80s were so diverse. There was a period when we were always being lumped into a box with U2, even though we don't sound anything like each other. We first met those guys in the 70s and we became great friends immediately. I remember, in the mid-80s, I was in the studio in Ireland with U2, and Edge had his Vox AC30, his delays and his black Strat in there. I said to him, 'Give us a shot!' I picked up his Strat – and I sounded like Edge! By the way, it was the best fucking guitar sound I've ever heard. It just sounded unbelievable. I remember thinking, 'Jesus, it's in the gear as well...'"

Street Fighting Men

"*Street Fighting Years* [1989] was an interesting album. We loved the records that Trevor Horn and Stephen Lipson were making, and they wanted to work with a bona fide band. Trevor's quite adventurous, so we set up a studio in a house in the Scottish Highlands and things would just happen. For example, with the track *This Is Your Land*, Jim said,

> *"The White Falcon is not the easiest to play, but it suited me because it speaks really well, no matter how distorted it is"*

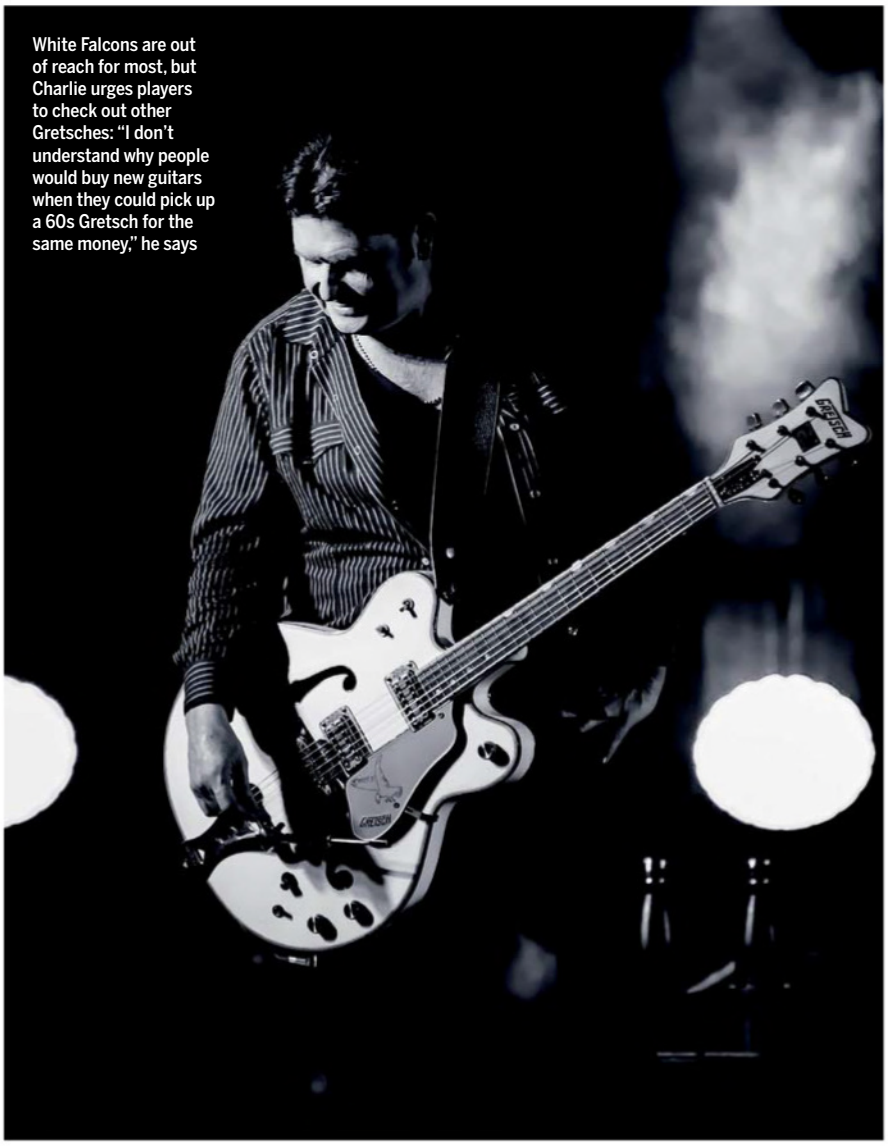
'Wouldn't it sound great if Lou Reed sang on that?' And Trevor and Steve would say, 'Well, let's see if he's up for it!' And he did it. Then Trevor said, 'You should do an old traditional Celtic song.' We were thinking, 'Really? That's too obvious,' but as it turns out, that's how *Belfast Child* came out. We had toured with Peter Gabriel so we did his song *Biko*.

"We were working with different musicians like Stewart Copeland and Manu Katché. Before we knew it, we had this album that had great big moments... and then there's other parts where we just felt like we had missed, we never quite got it. But we're not the judge of that. For a lot of people, *Street Fighting Years* is their favourite album."

The Devil You Know

"There were a few guitar players I love that play SGs, but I never got on well with them myself. I always found the balance too weird. But I started hearing this thing on records that I recognised as an SG sound and I realised there were a few things we were doing where that's the guitar I should have been using. Like Alice Cooper's early bands, or Zal Cleminson from The Sensational Alex Harvey Band, even Sister Rosetta Tharpe – you listen to her clipped playing and you think, 'That's an SG.'

"So about four years ago, I bought a 1962 white SG with the three pickups and the standard Vibrola, not the sideways one. And the sound of that guitar is just completely different – it's got a bite to it that you don't get with a Les Paul. It's got an attack. And there's something about the three-pickup [format]. It's quite weird when you're playing it – because you've not got that space for your right hand because the pickups are there, so you play differently. Funnily enough, I just decided last week that I was going to use the SG a lot more in our live set."



White Falcons are out of reach for most, but Charlie urges players to check out other Gretsches: "I don't understand why people would buy new guitars when they could pick up a 60s Gretsch for the same money," he says

PHOTO BY THORSTEN SAMESCH/TODDEVISION

From The Heart

"With the new Simple Minds album, *Direction Of The Heart*, we worked on about 25 songs and didn't really know what kind of record we were making. It was more about making sure the tracks cover all the things we find important, like energy, melodies and that it's going to work live. There are a few things that are slightly different territory for us and a bit more playful. We just said, 'Well, this feels good, and we'll learn about it as we go on.' You make a record and then you find out what you've made a year or two later. It sounds trite, but there's a point where it doesn't belong to you any more. When it's gone out and people have listened to it, then it's their record – it's kind of got nothing to do with us any more."

Simple Minds' new album, *Direction Of The Heart*, is out now on BMG

www.simpleminds.com

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Jimi Hendrix & Noel Redding talk strings with Rotosound's Alan Marcuson. March 1st, 1967.
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ALTER BRIDGE

Guitar duo Myles Kennedy and Mark Tremonti discuss their new album, custom guitars, the art of crafting long songs, and why you really, really don't want tinnitus...

Words George Garner

Alter Bridge's singer/guitarist Myles Kennedy and co-shredder/backing vocalist Mark Tremonti are deep in contemplation. Sitting in Kensington's Royal Garden Hotel, they're discussing the name of their highly anticipated seventh album, *Pawns & Kings*. "It was a phrase that jumped out to us on many levels," says Myles. "With the title track's lyrics, 'The last shall be first,' and also that idea of rising above impossible circumstances? That's empowering. That was a theme that we could stand behind."

It's little wonder that this underdog narrative appealed. Forged as they were from two imploded bands – Mark Tremonti, bassist Brian Marshall and drummer Scott Phillips from Creed, and Myles Kennedy from The Mayfield Four – few favoured Alter Bridge's chances of success when they emerged back in 2004. Even Myles had been perilously close to packing it all in to become a guitar teacher not long before. Thankfully for everyone involved, what actually transpired was, of course, the emergence of a modern-rock behemoth, and one that was determined not to retread past glories on album number seven. In fact, they straight-up weren't allowed...

"Scott Phillips is the master of that, the man drives me nuts," grins Mark, saluting his drummer's critical ears. "I'll come into the studio saying, 'This is the best idea I've got.' And he's like, 'You did that chord progression 10 years ago!'"

What *Pawns & Kings* offers is a band pushing itself hard – one example of which is the epic track *Fable Of The Silent Son*. Since 2007, Alter Bridge's elegiac classic *Blackbird* has stood proudly as their longest song at just shy of eight minutes. But not any more, with *Fable Of The Silent Son* coming in at eight minutes and 22 seconds. "It's almost as long as Iron Maiden's *[The Rime Of The] Ancient Mariner*," says Myles. "It was by far the hardest song, at least for me, to put together. There's at least, jeez, three time-changes in there – it always keeps you guessing."

With a whole new Alter Bridge album to dissect, it's the perfect time to dig deep into the dynamics of one of rock's most exciting guitar partnerships.

1. Producer Michael 'Elvis' Baskette (far right) and engineer Jef Moll (at the desk) steer the ship during the recording of *Pawns & Kings* at Studio Barbarosa in Gotha, Florida

You both play complex guitar parts *and* sing in Alter Bridge – when you're in the studio, do you ever think about how you will deliver that live? Or do you record what you want and figure it out on stage later?
Myles Kennedy: "When I was writing the verse of *Silver Tongue*, I wasn't thinking about trying to sing over the top of it. The beauty is I can just lay it out and let Mark do it – he plays it tighter than I would anyway because his right hand is so great. The problem is on the bridge where the vocal is the most demanding part of the song. It goes way high and there's no way I'm gonna be able to play and hit that vocal. Yesterday, we were doing an acoustic version and I just kind of stopped playing."

***Fable Of The Silent Son* is now officially Alter Bridge's longest song. How do you approach writing an epic?**
Mark Tremonti: "I liken it to telling a story. My cousin's husband is an author and I was saying how impressive it is that writers can start at the beginning of a story, work their way through, and have everything make sense by the end. He was like, 'That's not how it goes: you write one scene and another and another, and then you see how it flows together.' That's exactly how you write a long song. You have an idea that you really like and you partner it with others. By the time you're done, you've got seven parts that you don't want to get rid of and it's like, 'All right, it's not gonna be a four-minute song.'"

The guitar tone on *Sin After Sin* is really interesting, and slightly unusual. Is that a harmoniser being used?
Mark: "It's an octave pedal. That was one of the first songs I worked on for this record and that riff immediately came out. The song's all built around that. The riff does work without it, but everything's cooler with an octave pedal. I love writing with them."

"Different tunings are essential to me. If I just had standard tuning, I would run out of ideas"
MARK TREMONTI

To what extent do you use altered tunings? And what do they bring out in your playing?
Mark: "Different tunings are essential to me. If I just had standard tuning, I would run out of ideas. Every time I feel uninspired, I'll just try to find a new tuning. We were pretty straightforward on this record, but *Fable Of The Silent Son* might be one of the lowest tunings we've ever done – I think I'm way down in A or A#."
Myles: "True story: I'm a massive Steely Dan fan, and when Walter Becker passed away I bought one of his Alembic [Orion] baritone guitars at an auction [in 2019]. That was what inspired that sludgy riff in the first half of that song when I was demoing it. I was gonna use it on the record, but I didn't want to take it out of my studio and fly with it..."

Myles, you were recently spotted playing what can only be described as a Telecaster-shaped PRS. Can you tell us about it?
Myles: "When I did my last solo record, [2021's] *Ides Of March*, I used a lot of single-coil tones and I had something in mind that I wanted to hear. I also had something as far as the neck dimensions, so I spoke with them. On that solo record, I had a '52 Blackguard Tele that was all over it, but I'm not going to take that on the road, right? Interestingly enough, that was a guitar that

"I come from more of a slinky, bluesy approach and stoner riffing, and Mark comes with this mechanical precision"

MYLES KENNEDY

2. Extended songs have a real place in the Alter Bridge catalogue, and yet there's always room for some concise pop writing, as Myles explains: "We always like to have a nice melody to hang your hat on and we do have songs that follow a more traditional formula, too... We like to mix it up"

was Doug Fieger's from The Knack – I love guitars with a story. I also really love Blackguards, Broadcasters, Nocasters and the first two or three years of those Telecasters were amazing. So I somehow convinced them to build this creature for me and I love it. It sounds great. It's all over this record: 80 per cent of the rhythms are that guitar, and all of the solos. It has a single-coil tonality, but, to me, it's almost like a really aggressive P-90. It complements Mark's humbuckers really well."

Mark, to what degree has your signature PRS electric evolved over time?
Mark: "Every year goes by and the tuning system will update itself or the pickups will be the same guts but have a more modern look. But, essentially, the guitar is pretty much the same, but we have different colours. There's also a fixed-bridge version that I prefer. Originally, the guitar had a floating bridge and I loved it, but nowadays I prefer the fixed bridge; it just feels better under my fingers and it stays in tune better."

***Pawns & Kings* has some ferocious riffs on it. What are your best tips for playing accurately with aggression?**
Myles: "It really is about balance. For the fast stuff, Mark obviously spent hour upon hour woodshedding

2

"It's interesting, my voice is kind of polarising, it's not for everybody"
MYLES KENNEDY

his right hand and that was one of the [interesting] things when we first started playing together. I come from more of a slinky, bluesy approach and stoner riffing, and he comes with this mechanical precision, so we were talking about how to develop my right hand. He said one of the big things is to just do downstrokes and develop that..."

Ah, the James Hetfield approach. How long did that take you to perfect?
Myles: "Man, I'm still working on it now... It's been nearly 20 years! [laughs]"

High-gain tones can be quite difficult to balance so you have clarity but also drive – how do you achieve those rhythm tones and lead tones respectively?
Mark: "I track with less gain than I would perform live. If I'm live and I'm at one o'clock, I'll be at, like, 11 o'clock in the studio. My amp does have a lot of gain, so you've got to turn that back to get it clear and tight. Me and Myles double our guitars left and right each, so even if you pull your gain down and double your guitars, it's still gonna sound big and thick, but if you saturate it too much it's just gonna sound squishy. So in the studio, less gain works better."

Where does your drive mainly come from in your songs: pickups, overdrive pedals or the amp itself?
Mark: "For the most part, other than leads, I don't use anything but the amp tones. I'm a simple person when it comes to effects: I've got a wah pedal, an overdrive pedal, sometimes an octave pedal and, rarely, a Uni-Vibe just for fun live. Any time you hear effects and atmospheric stuff on the record , that's usually Myles. I do the day shift, I play the meat and potatoes with my rhythm tracks and then Myles will stay up until four in the morning with pedals from all over the world and do all the ethereal stuff. That's what happens when the sun goes down..."
Myles: "My setup depends [on the song]. If it's a song where the meat and potatoes come from me, I go into my Diezels: it's a combination of 40 per cent Herbert, 60 per cent VH4. I don't use a ton of gain. In fact, I would like it to articulate a little differently because I know Mark's going to have more saturation. We want a nice blend. But then, if it's adding sonic landscapes, it's a totally different approach. I'm a big fan of Tri-Chorus."

Your voices have to compete with a lot of noise but always come through clearly on record. How do you keep the mix so defined and uncluttered?
Myles: "It's interesting, my voice is kind of polarising, it's not for everybody. But I think part of that is because

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3. The songwriting process is very much a group effort in the band, as Mark explains: "If Myles was immediately lukewarm on something, either I'm like, 'All right, I'm gonna do it with another band,' or I don't believe in the idea any more..."

there are certain frequencies in it that can really cut through everything. Elvis [Baskette, producer] is very good at making sure everything has its space. On this new record, it was a totally new console, microphone and preamp that we used. It was probably the easiest vocal tracking session I've ever had – some of the songs we were just singing three times and then we were done. The definition of this new rig was so crisp, I could hear every little detail, it was helping me with my pitch and my phrasing. It was the bee's knees."

Mark, to what extent does digital amp modelling form part of your musical output?

Mark: "I'm an amp fanatic, I have a room full of them. Not only do I have a room that's only for amps, my studio's got amps piled up everywhere, too. It's an addiction. There's only a few material things in life that I really care about having, and that's pinball machines and guitar amplifiers. I tried a Kemper on tour with [Mark's solo project] Tremonti, which was great – it sounded excellent for rhythm guitar, there was just something on the lead that I didn't like.

"But what it did for me was [act as] a great transition in getting me onto in-ears live. Ask Myles, I was always like, 'I'll never be on in-ears. I'll never be digital. Let the kids do that.' What was my beef? I just love the organic sound of the tube amplifier, the crowd and the PA. But after I became a singer for Tremonti, you can control your [vocal] pitch so much better when you're on in-ears. So I just learned to get my guitars in a proper mix... So, to answer your question, digital amps helped me get onto in-ears."

"There're only a few material things I care about, and that's pinball machines and guitar amps"
MARK TREMONTI

On the subject of ears, how do you look after yours as professional musicians?

Mark: "I'll go to a bar with my friends and, if the stereo in the bar is too loud, I'll have napkins in my ears. Or whatever it takes. Back in the day, when I didn't use in-ears, I would just stand where it wasn't loud – I wasn't standing in front of my amp or in front of the cymbals. I've avoided tinnitus..."

Myles: "I've had tinnitus for about 20 years and it's a drag. Is it severe? It's getting there. It sucks. And look, I use in-ears, I always use earplugs, I'm always very responsible, but it's just through how much I've toured over the last 20 years. White noise helps. The human brain is fascinating that way, when you have something nagging that's always there, the brain finds a way to veer away from it."

Finally, present company excluded, who's doing the most exciting guitar-based work right now?

Mark: "Mateus Asato is one of the most incredible players, his playing is beautiful. I've always had an ear for beauty, even with the metal stuff I listened to when I was a kid. You'd hear the beginning of Metallica's *Battery* or *Damage, Inc* and have the cool, beautifully written parts... And then they kick you in the nuts."

Myles: "I think we'd both agree that Derek Trucks is not from this Earth... Every time you hear him, that man's soul pours out through that instrument; his phrasing and his vibrato pull on my heartstrings. It's incredible."

Mark: "I've come to realise that people like Derek Trucks, Joe Bonamasa, Guthrie Govan, people that started on guitar at, like, four years old, they're the genius players you can't replicate with people like myself who started at 11 or 12. I missed those formative years. You're not just going to pick up guitar and learn a couple of Derek Trucks licks and get what he's doing; you need a lifetime of dedication and soul. The more you know about the guitar, the more you realise the gaps of knowledge and wisdom that you have..." G

Alter Bridge's new album, *Pawns & Kings*, is available now via Napalm Records

https://alterbridge.com

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Gibson
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Lustre For Glory

A trio of Gibson dreadnoughts with faded satin nitro finishes, vintage appointments and modern-day electronics. Serious players or mere novelty acts? Let the auditions begin...

Words David Mead **Photography** Phil Barker

GIBSON J-45 50S FADED, J-35 30S FADED & HUMMINGBIRD FADED £2,169, £1,909 & £3,039

CONTACT **Gibson** PHONE **+1-615-871-4500** WEB **www.gibson.com**

What You Need To Know

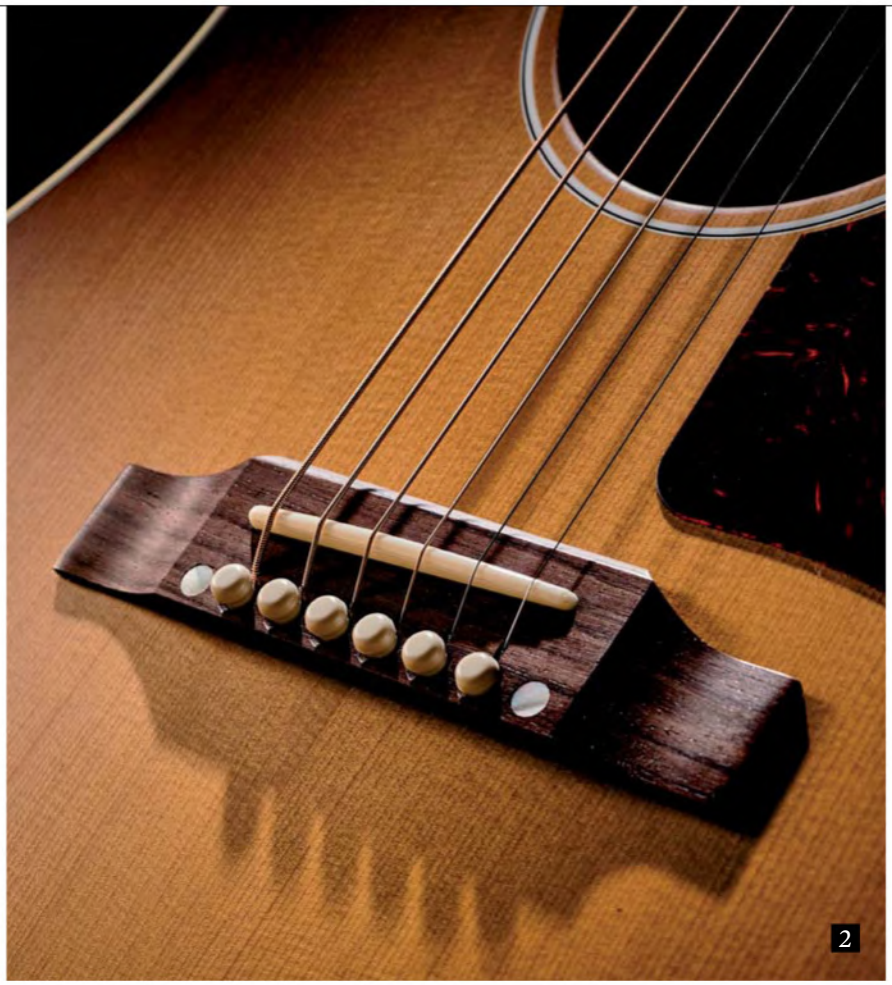
1. **Are these any relation to the Faded Gibsons in the last issue?** Yes, there is a distinct family resemblance. Satin-finished 'faded' Gibsons have proved to be surprise bestsellers in the past, and so rather than ask ourselves, "why?", we tend to think, "why not?" and judge them on the basis "do they stack up as good instruments?"

2. **How can you 'fade' Sitka spruce?** Well, quite. It's more like Gibson hasn't gone down the well-trodden route of staining the top to give the natural ageing process a kick start. If nature follows course, which it almost certainly will in time, the Sitka will amber up nicely and lose its current pale demeanour.

3. **Satin nitro – what's the appeal?** It's a tactile thing. Applying a very thin non-gloss nitro finish gives the guitar a worn-in feel – as opposed to a heavy relic'd worn-out texture – where it's possible to feel the grain of the timber under the hands. A thin finish also allows the wood to 'breathe' and vibrate more freely, enhancing tone.

Following on from Gibson's Faded 50s and 60s Les Pauls and the '61 SG we looked at in our last issue, it's now the turn of these three dreadnoughts to step into the spotlight. And Gibson's choice of models to sign up to its faded finish regime is an interesting one. Basically, the whole idea sees guitars receiving a thin coat of nitrocellulose over bleached out bodies, as if you've reduced the colour saturation in some photo processing software. When Gibson introduced its Faded series electrics back in 2005 they proved a somewhat surprising success, players eagerly taking to the satin finishes and slightly reduced retail prices. So why not extend the idea to the acoustic catalogue, too, and see whether the somewhat more conservative unplugged community warms to the concept in the same fashion?

The three models chosen for the Faded treatment include the J-45, J-35 and Hummingbird, and of the three the bleached-out concept is most obvious on the '45, the other two both having natural



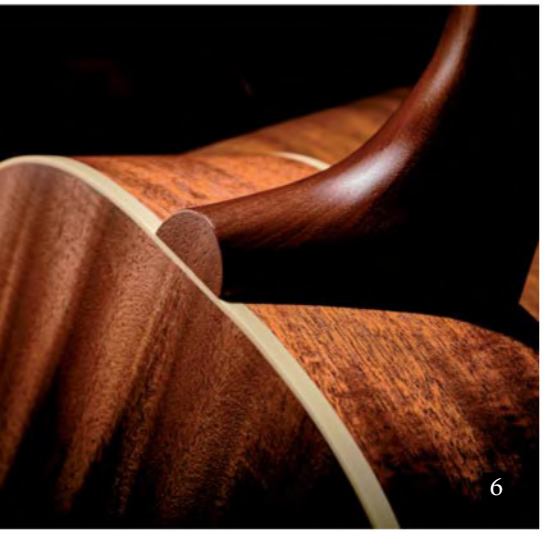
Sitka tops. Ironically, of course, these will slowly turn amber over the years, which kinda defeats the idea, but you'll still have the satin feel and thin nitro to carry on with. Also, we wouldn't be doing our job if we didn't point out that we've come across many vintage J-45s in our travels and none of them have lost that distinctive dark brown finish. So we're guessing that Gibson is not going for the vintage vibe here, just literally a toned-down version of the original.

All three acoustics here have some history behind them. The J-45 is known as Gibson's 'workhorse' acoustic and has found favour among the bluegrass crowd as well as singer-songwriters. Originally introduced into the catalogue in 1942, Gibson has chosen to give this version a 50s spec and to give the company credit, it does look like it could have been residing in an attic for a few decades. The J-35 is arguably lesser known. This model comes from the USA's Depression era of the 1930s – 1936, to be precise – and came about as a pared-down, no-frills, affordable model for musicians of the day, costing only $35 at launch. The Hummingbird, on the other hand, needs no introduction. A child of the 60s, it's one of Gibsons most prestigious acoustics – and one of the costliest when it first saw light of day, second only to the 'gentle giant' J-200, in fact.

1. Gibson's J-45 has been a staple in the company's acoustic catalogue since the early 1940s
2. The dark brown sunburst finish has been reduced to a slight tan for this Faded version
3. A rosewood 'board atop a mahogany neck is all part of the J-45 spec – faded or not
4. A set of white buttoned Gotoh tuners adds to the guitar's 1950s livery

5. The J-35 is known as a 'Depression Era' instrument – a stripped back, no-frills acoustic for the economically troubled 1930s

6. All three models here share the same spec in terms of body timbers: Sitka spruce tops with mahogany backs, sides and necks



Despite the fact that the three models would seem to be separate from one another in terms of the era in which they were first launched, they are all surprisingly similar in terms of spec. For instance, they are all 406mm (16-inch) wide dreads, the J-35 and J-45 both round shouldered and the Hummingbird square shouldered. Tops are Sitka spruce, with mahogany for the backs and sides. Necks are mahogany topped with rosewood fingerboards, the '45 and Hummingbird sporting 20 frets apiece, the '35, 19. All are fitted with LR Baggs VTC pickups/preamps with their controls – volume and tone – tucked away on the bass side of the soundhole.

There are some differences in terms of hardware and styling, of course, the '45 and Hummingbird having Gotoh tuners – the J-45 white button, Kluson-style and the Hummingbird goes for gold Kluson-style with greenish keystone buttons. The J-35, meanwhile, has Grover open-back tuners.

Underneath the tops, all three have hand-scalloped X bracing. The neck profiles are what Gibson calls merely 'rounded', and the fretboard radius on each is a flat 305mm (12-inch) with the standard Gibson scale length.

Sound-wise, the J-35 is quite possibly the most well balanced of the three – and it's the cheapest

With all these similarities, it's going to be interesting to hear if there are any distinct tonal differences between the three models when we begin our explorations in that department shortly. But it's fairly safe to say that any other variations on the themes already established are more of the cosmetic variety rather than constructional. For instance, it's fairly obvious from the accompanying photographs that the Hummingbird is the most ornate of the three here, with its signature highly

THE RIVALS

If the whole 'faded finish' idea isn't a dealbreaker, then you've plenty of opportunities where these particular dreadnought styles are concerned. In fact, we'd encourage you to begin looking at Epiphone's range, as that Gibson-related brand's prices start at around £569 for the 'inspired by Gibson' J-45 and £749 for the Hummingbird.

Failing that, Gibson itself offers a whole slew of variations on the guitars here with the standard J-45 clocking in at £2,200 and the Hummingbird at the £3.5k mark. However, the J-35 model is more elusive in both ranges.

If it's vintage chic you're after then Atkin's The Forty Three (£3,199) is well worth a look. Honourable mention must also go to Eastman's E20SS/v as another J-45 inspired acoustic, which streets at around the £1,600 mark.

7. Despite the fact that the spruce tops on both the J-35 and Hummingbird are quite pale at present, they will both amber up naturally over time

8. The silver buttoned Grover open-backed tuners set off the rear of the J-35's headstock nicely, enhancing the guitar's vintage vibe

figured scratchplate and mother-of-pearl parallelogram 'board inlays. The J-35, then, occupies the other end of the decorative scale with a very stripped-down demeanour, the fiery scratchplate being its only distinguishing characteristic. It's nice to see that it bears Gibson's historic pre-war logo, too.

Feel & Sounds

Taking each of the guitars in turn, we'll begin with the J-45. The elephant in the room here, of course, is the degree of fading in the finish and, as we've already mentioned, the fact that this isn't necessarily the way in which a traditional J-45 would age, if indeed 'ageing' is what Gibson is going for here. This is most likely to be a deciding factor for many over and above the thin nitro finish consideration. In the short period that we had these instruments as house guests, let's just say that the finish grew on us – in fact, it was quickly overwritten by the way the guitar sounds. A J-45 is known for its earthy,

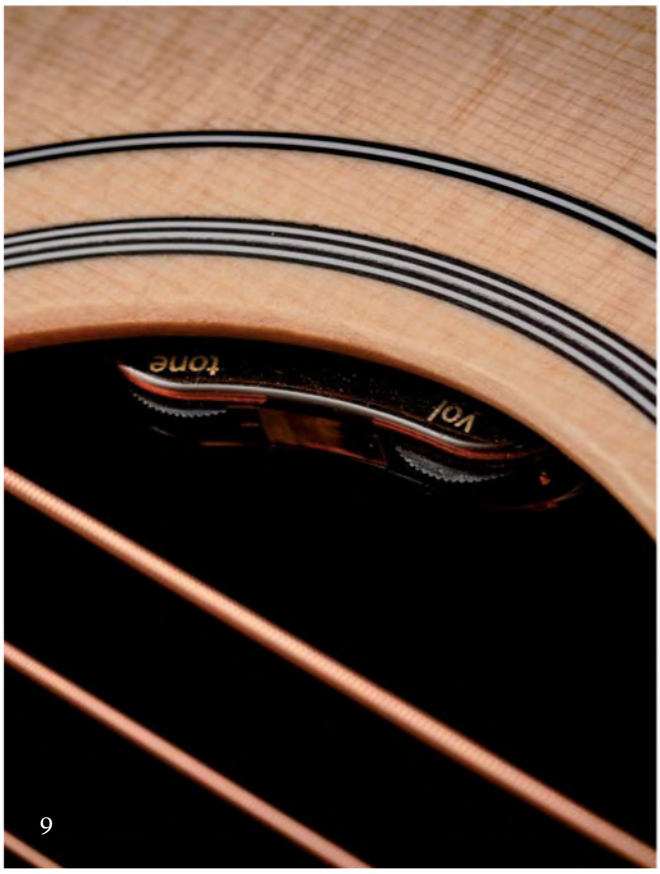
9. All three guitars featured here are fitted with an LR Baggs VTC pickup/preamp system with controls for volume and tone tucked away inside the soundhole

10. The Hummingbird is the most ornate of the acoustics reviewed here, with upmarket features including this engraved truss-rod cover

woody tones, with snarling bass and sweet trebles, and we weren't let down in any of these respects here. It would be true to say that it's not the greatest-sounding '45 we've heard; the basses are all present and correct, but the trebles didn't gleam and shine in quite the way we've experienced in the past. Of course, this might change as the Sitka top wakes up a bit further down the road.

In terms of feel, the J-45 was pretty much as expected. The rounded, full but not too chubby feel of the neck felt good in the hand, campfire chords were effortless and girthy, solo expeditions further up the 'board rewarding and full. It's a nice instrument, for sure.

Turning our attention to the J-35, we found that there were some sharp fret ends on the treble side of the fretboard – easily remedied and possibly due to shrinkage since manufacture but still a slight bump in an otherwise smooth road. Sound-wise, it's quite possibly the most well balanced of the three – and considering that it's also the cheapest, this is something to bear in mind. Trebles shine more than on its J-45 cousin, but perhaps at the cost of a slight reduction in the bass. Any growl or bark hereabouts has been replaced by a proportionate low-frequency response.



9

10

11

12

The Hummingbird is the most ornate, with its signature highly figured scratchplate and mother-of-pearl parallelogram inlays

With the Hummingbird, we're instantly back to girthy basses and powerful mellifluous trebles, as befits the flagship of this particular fleet of three. In fact, it slightly outclasses the J-45 in this respect – technically, the square-shoulder aspect here should make a small difference and, if so, this is probably it. It hints at being the all-rounder it always was and no faded livery is going to affect that. The thin nitro coating must also play its role as it will allow the body timbers to vibrate more freely, but this 'Bird certainly wins the best in class on this occasion.

Firing up the onboard LR Baggs VTC pickups on all three reveals pretty much what we expected in that the character of each is cleanly and efficiently transported to the electronic realm. There's also the added charm that it's possible here to tame the basses a bit on the J-45 and use the tone control to bring the trebles in check should the need arise.

11. The Hummingbird's legendary pickguard sets off the Sitka spruce on the top of the guitar

12. Befitting its presence here as the most expensive of our faded trio, the Hummingbird is fitted with gold Gotoh tuners with vintage-style keystone buttons

Another mark of prestige on the Hummingbird is its parallelogram inlays

Verdict

Whatever we think of these instruments, we have to add to the equation the fact that these faded dreads are only a few hundred pounds cheaper than the standard full gloss versions – and looking around the internet the gap is narrowed by some of the prices retailers are selling the standard equivalents for. So a purchase here isn't a way into getting a Gibson dread 'on the cheap'. In many ways, you'd be buying them because you enjoy the faded finishes and the thin nitro feel present here. That kind of decision can only be made in a hands-on situation.

The J-45's finish grew on us – in fact, it was quickly overwritten by the way the guitar sounds

Our opinion is that the J-35 and Hummingbird come down to the thin finish – those tops are going to darken with age. It just leaves the paleness of the J-45 to consider. We lived with it and ended up liking it. Would we add it to our collection? Certainly. But it may be a different matter for you. The advice here, then, is if the whole concept of faded finishes appeals – or at least doesn't appeal – seek them out and give them an audition of your own. We like 'em and you might, too. G

GIBSON J-45 50S FADED

PRICE: £2,169 (inc case)
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Round shoulder dreadnought
TOP: Sitka spruce
BACK/SIDES: Mahogany
MAX RIM DEPTH: 103mm
MAX BODY WIDTH: 406mm
NECK: Mahogany
SCALE LENGTH: 628mm (24.75")
TUNERS: Gotoh white button
NUT/WIDTH: Bone/43.8mm
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood
FRETS: 20
BRIDGE/SPACING: Rosewood/56mm
ELECTRICS: LR Baggs VTC
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 1.45/3.2
OPTIONS: None
RANGE OPTIONS: Gibson's Faded acoustic range also comprises the J-45, Hummingbird and J-35 on review
LEFT-HANDERS: No
FINISH: Satin nitrocellulose

8/10

PROS Heritage, history and full of character; growling, husky basses

CONS The faded thing isn't going to appeal to everyone

GIBSON J-35 30S FADED

PRICE: £1,909 (inc case)
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Round shoulder dreadnought
TOP: Sitka spruce
BACK/SIDES: Mahogany
MAX RIM DEPTH: 103mm
MAX BODY WIDTH: 406mm
NECK: Mahogany
SCALE LENGTH: 628mm (24.75")
TUNERS: Grover open back
NUT/WIDTH: Bone/43.8mm
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood
FRETS: 19
BRIDGE/SPACING: Rosewood/56mm
ELECTRICS: LR Baggs VTC
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 1.63/3.6
OPTIONS: None
RANGE OPTIONS: See other guitars on review
LEFT-HANDERS: No
FINISH: Satin nitrocellulose

8/10

PROS Good, balanced sound; historic appointments

CONS Slightly sharp fret ends on the treble side

GIBSON HUMMINGBIRD FADED

PRICE: £3,039 (inc case)
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Square shoulder dreadnought
TOP: Sitka spruce
BACK/SIDES: Mahogany
MAX RIM DEPTH: 113mm
MAX BODY WIDTH: 406mm
NECK: Mahogany
SCALE LENGTH: 628mm (24.75")
TUNERS: Gold Gotoh/ keystone buttons
NUT/WIDTH: Bone/43.8mm
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood
FRETS: 20
BRIDGE/SPACING: Rosewood/56mm
ELECTRICS: LR Baggs VTC
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 1.68/3.72
OPTIONS: None
RANGE OPTIONS: See other guitars on review
LEFT-HANDERS: No
FINISH: Satin nitrocellulose

8/10

PROS Full of character; good sounding, robust basses; sweet trebles

CONS You have to buy into the whole faded thing and thin nitro feel and not everybody will

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Cool Cats

There's no pussyfooting around for new company KittycasterFX as it hits the ground running with a pair of serious tone-shapers

Words Trevor Curwen
Photography Phil Barker

KITTYCASTERFX TREMDRIVER & GROOVY WIZARD $399 & $299

CONTACT **KittycasterFX** WEB **www.kittycasterfx.com**

What You Need To Know

1 KittycasterFX? Never heard of them...
While you may not have heard of this new company, which only formed in April of this year, Catalinbread is likely to be a familiar name. And these pedals are the brainchild of Howard Gee, former Catalinbread pedal designer.

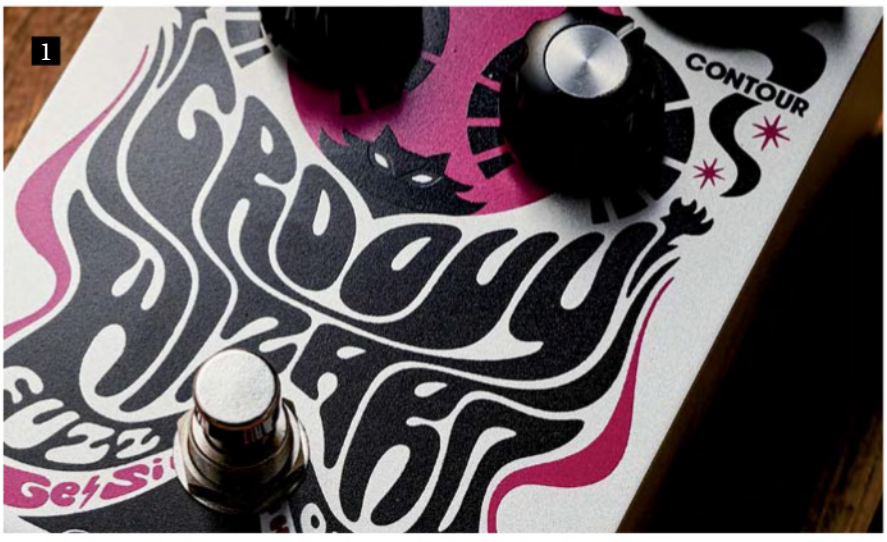
2 What makes these different?
Howard's idea here was to make the most responsive guitar pedal ever. He says that these are designed to bring out every nuance of your playing and to make your rig sound bigger and more dynamic.

3 Only two pedals?
So far, but both have plenty packed into them. The Tremdriver offers an Echoplex-style preamp plus Harmonic tremolo, while the Groovy Wizard's powers range from boost to full-on fuzz.

If Howard Gee's cat hadn't walked past his Strat just as he was trying to think up a name, this pedal company may never have been called Kittycaster! These hand-built pedals have a distinctive look to match, too, with a pretty damn solid wedge-shaped, two-part sheet aluminium chassis and psychedelic-style graphics. All of the connections are on the front, so the pedals sit snugly side by side. With that sloping surface a whole array of them would look really good, but we may have to wait a while for more models to be added to the range. The pedals sit on four rubber feet that can be easily undone with your fingers to get the two chassis sections apart and that can be replaced with the supplied countersunk screws for a flush base if you want to add them to your 'board using Velcro.

Tremdriver Preamp/ Harmonic Tremolo

The intent of the Tremdriver preamp is to make everything sound bigger, wider and punchier. Basically, it's a high-headroom preamp that runs from a standard nine-volt supply but internally converts it to 24 volts. If you're familiar with the properties of the EP-3 Echoplex preamp, this is it writ large: where the EP-3 featured a single preamp JFET stage, here you get three discrete JFET preamp stages in a series/ parallel configuration. Your guitar signal hits the single first stage and then the Drive control splits out the signal to two parallel JFET preamp stages that are voiced treble and bass. Besides the preamp you also get harmonic tremolo from the pedal, kicked in with the LFO footswitch. When this is



1. On the Groovy Wizard you can control the amount of low frequencies entering the circuitry with the Contour knob – keep it low for a tighter sound or turn it up to add heft

2. The Groovy Wizard's Presence knob controls the high frequencies at the output and is used for fine-tuning your treble content

3. The Tremdriver's Drive control sets how hard the second JFET preamp stages are driven. The LFO Bias knob adjusts the waveform of the LFO with steeper notches as you turn it up – the arc with the thick black line is where you'll find the thickest swirl

2

There is remarkable touch-sensitivity from the Groovy Wizard – it responds brilliantly to picking dynamics

engaged the signal starts panning between the treble and bass JFET stages to give you harmonic tremolo sound.

When engaged, the preamp has an immediate positive effect on your tone – everything seems somehow bigger and better – and it's especially adept at fattening up single coils. There's more, though, as there's plenty of boost to be had by turning up the Output and Drive knobs, the juxtapositioning of the two offering variations on the crunch engendered at any chosen volume level.

The recommended position for this pedal in your signal chain is near the end (but before reverb and delay) to give everything that's come before a hefty dose of tone conditioning, and for it to act like the master fader for the whole pedalboard. In that role it's really one of those always-on tonebuilders, and the tremolo, of course, can be switched in and out at will. Alternatively, you can use it to kick in for an instant shift upwards if you want something to push your amp for solos or extra emphasis, but remember that the trem only works if the preamp is active.

3

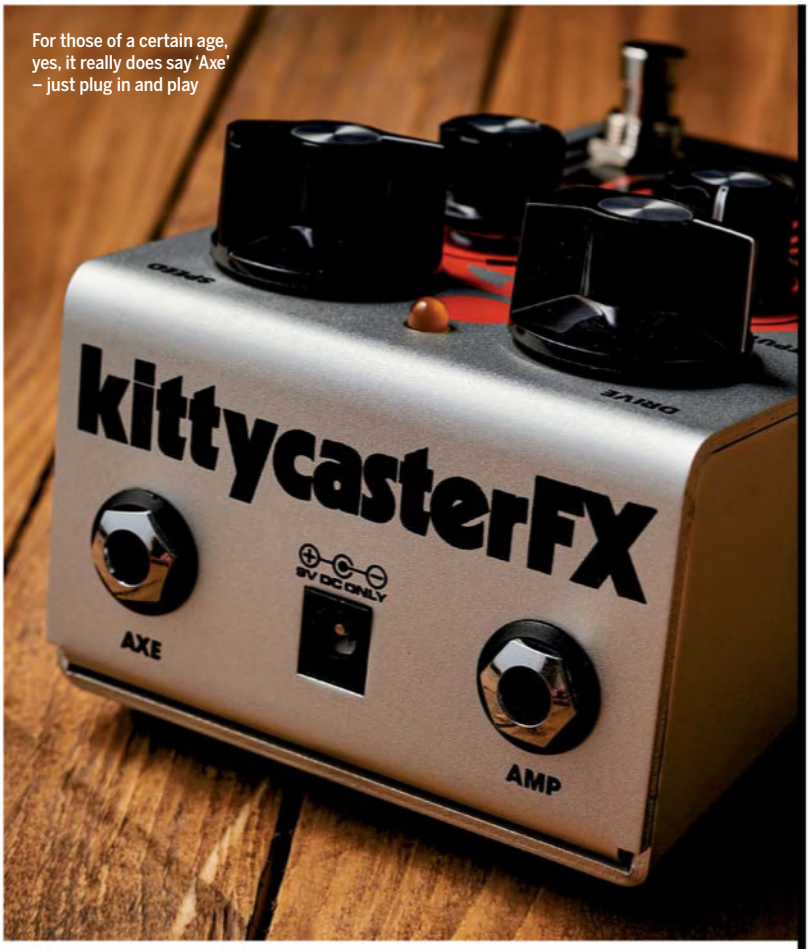
As for that trem, it's really versatile and sounds great. You have a large knob to control the speed from a slow pulse to a very fast warble, but the nature of the sound is determined by the LFO Bias knob, which works its magic on the waveform. The LFO circuit here has a vintage connection in that it was derived from that found in a Uni-Vibe, evident in the shallow rounded throb of the lower settings of the knob. As you turn the Bias up the waveform moves on from the softer edged pulse, getting progressively sharper for a choppier sound and tremolo of the on/off nature.

Groovy Wizard Fuzz Driver

The Groovy Wizard Fuzz Driver is a two-transistor fuzz pedal that utilises both germanium and silicon transistors. The design brief was to go beyond the type of fuzzes that have just one setting that works and create a pedal where each control has a full range of usefulness throughout the rotation of the knob. Furthermore, the pedal had to overcome a range of common fuzz pedal problems: it had to work with a wah or buffer in front, and work equally well with single coils and humbuckers plus a variety of amps, allowing the character of the guitar to come through. All of those boxes have been ticked.

Designed to take advantage of higher voltage levels to increase headroom and dynamics, the pedal has 18-volt operation either from your own power supply or two nine-volt batteries, if you prefer batteries in a fuzz. It also works fine on a standard nine-volt supply; Howard Gee says anything from five volts up to 18 will do. Our preference was for the full 18-volt headroom, but you can creatively use lower voltages to zero in on a preferred sound with increased saturation.

There are the expected Volume and Gain knobs here, but the pedal also adds two tone controls, Presence and Contour, designed to subtly shape the pedal's response. The Contour control shapes the low-end before it hits the fuzz circuitry, keeping things tighter or adding girth, while Presence adjusts top-end at the output for adding sparkle and bite, or to best match how things are working with your amp. The range here runs from clean boost territory to crunchy drive with a fuzzy harmonic edge, through to a satisfyingly fat, full-on sustain-y fuzz. There is remarkable touch-sensitivity as the pedal responds brilliantly to picking dynamics, allowing



For those of a certain age, yes, it really does say 'Axe' – just plug in and play

THE RIVALS

For the Tremdriver, you'd likely have to put a couple of pedals together to get similar functionality. There are plenty of EP-3-style preamps about, but the Catalinbread Epoch Boost (£139) has the requisite two-knob array. The Xotic EP Booster (£119) is well respected if you don't mind not having separate control over output level. For tremolo, take a look at the Jam Pedals Harmonious Monk (£239), Supro Tremolo (£199) and Walrus Audio Monument V2 (£185), all of which offer both harmonic and amplitude tremolo. There's no end of fuzz pedals available to try out, but the Wampler Velvet Fuzz (£199), with its Big and Tight switch options, looks to be a likely contender here.

It's great to see a new pedal company emerge with such a commendable ethos and attention to detail

you to be expressive in your playing – caressing the strings with a softer touch for cleaner sound, digging in to bring out the dirt, and rolling back your volume knob for a very smooth clean-up.

Verdict

It's great to see a new pedal company emerge with such a commendable ethos and attention to detail – *and* come up with a brace of pedals that deserve a place on the classiest of 'boards. Our only concern is the price. At the time of writing KittycasterFX has no UK distributor or dealers, so availability is direct from its website. Now, while the dollar prices may be commensurate with similar boutique offerings in the USA, over here you'd have to counter in VAT, import duty and delivery, and with the current dismal exchange rate, that would put the Tremdriver close to a rather daunting £500. G

KITTYCASTERFX TREMDRIVER PREAMP/HARMONIC TREMOLO

PRICE: $399
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Preamp/Harmonic Tremolo pedal
FEATURES: True bypass
CONTROLS: Drive, Speed, Output, LFO Bias, LFO footswitch, Bypass footswitch
CONNECTIONS: Standard input, standard output
POWER: 9V DC adaptor (not supplied) 70mA
DIMENSIONS: 86 (w) x 139 (d) x 75mm (h)

Guitarist CHOICE 9/10

PROS Excellent build quality; ergonomic wedge-shaped design; versatility of function; sound quality

CONS Expensive

KITTYCASTERFX GROOVY WIZARD FUZZ DRIVER

PRICE: $299
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Fuzz Driver pedal
FEATURES: True bypass
CONTROLS: Volume, Gain, Presence, Contour, Bypass footswitch
CONNECTIONS: Standard input, standard output
POWER: 9-18V DC adaptor (not supplied) or two 9V batteries, 0.5 to 0.25mA
DIMENSIONS: 86 (w) x 139 (d) x 75mm (h)

Guitarist CHOICE 9/10

PROS As per the Tremdriver

CONS Expensive; some may miss having an LED, but adding an LED to fuzz circuits could negatively affect dynamics, touch-sensitivity and tone

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« BLUEPRINT »

SUPER 'NAUT

If you can't make the world's most influential acoustic guitar better, you can always make it bigger, explain Scott Sasser and Tim Teel of Martin

Words Jamie Dickson

Go big or go home, as they say – and a new guitar design from Martin, the company that gave birth to the Dreadnought in the early 1900s, certainly does that, though more subtly than you might think. The Super Dreadnought, recently debuted by Martin's Custom Shop, takes the classic square-shouldered, bass-rich design that's been copied by nearly every acoustic maker in the world and enlarges it even further. The result is a louder, grander instrument that "hits you in the chest" when you play. But does it only boom or can it whisper, too? And how do you make a larger guitar feel comfortable under the arm of both strummers and fingerstylists alike?

These were the challenges that Scott Sasser, director of Martin's Custom Shop, and Tim Teel, director of instrument design, faced when they upscaled the most influential acoustic in the world. And while the initial release is limited to two identically priced Custom Shop models, one in Guatemalan rosewood and the other in koa, it seems there are plans afoot for the Super Dreadnought to become a Standard line instrument thanks to its stellar performance in the hands of a diverse range of early adopters. We join Scott and Tim to find out what the big deal is...

Scott Sasser (left), director of Martin's Custom Shop, and Tim Teel, director of instrument design, came together to get the Super Dreadnought project afloat

How did the idea for the new Super Dreadnought come about?

Tim Teel: "Fred Greene [Martin's vice president of product] and I took a trip up to Fishman prior to the pandemic, back in 2019 or maybe a little bit before that. This was when we were trying to come up with a name for the SC, kicking around a few things. On the way up there, the radio's on and a Black Sabbath song came on – *Supernaut*. So I said to Fred, 'There you go, Fred, let's just call it the 'Supernaut',' and we had a laugh about that.

"But when we got back [to talking after] the pandemic, we were thinking, 'Hey, we need to do something new and different.' And Fred's like, 'I want to build a big guitar, I want to build the Supernaut...' I said, 'So you're talking a Super Dreadnought, right?' 'Yeah, Super Dreadnought.' We first developed the Super Dreadnought thinking it was going to be a Standard series launch. But then Scott was looking for a product to introduce on the Custom Expert side."

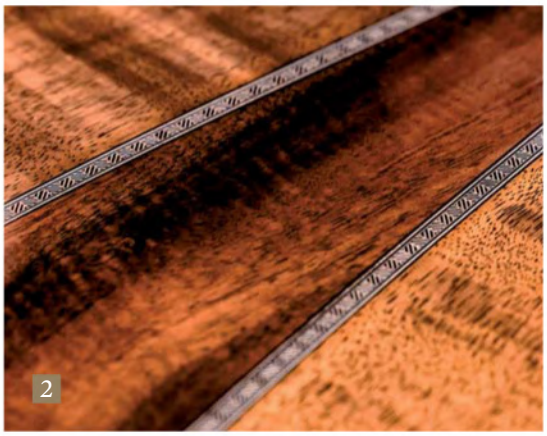
Scott Sasser: "Well, yes, Fred, as VP of product, tries to give folks a window on what he sees out in the real world. He had made the comment on numerous occasions that some manufacturers in our community were giving a lot of attention to smaller guitars, parlour shapes, and the kind of intimate, fragile, historic shapes that Martin has a catalogue full of. But who's going to build one of those better than Martin? Or with more complete accuracy or history than Martin? It's like they're trying to recreate something that Martin has already exhibited mastery at, to be bold in that statement.

"So Fred said, 'What if we just go the other direction? Go big. We have the history, and the capability and the know-how.' So that seed got planted: 'What would something bigger look like?' The conversation had been in the atmosphere [both] in the Custom office and among the R&D folks like Tim, who then explored the maximum dimensions that we could reliably produce in the factory.

"Fred Greene, Martin's VP of product, said 'What if we go big? We have the history, the capability and the know-how…'"

Tim Teel

1. Martin's old factory may have been superseded by a larger modern facility but its traditions live on – and also evolve



2. The beautiful three-piece back is reminiscent of that of a D-35

3. A Martin luthier tests out the expansive sound of a completed Super Dreadnought

4. A classic choice of Sitka spruce is used for the top. Note that the soundhole is subtly not radically larger than normal

"But then the pandemic made the world weird and everything went into lockdown. Just at that moment, we were in the process of releasing 28-style Expert Models [for example, the Custom Shop Expert 000-28 1937 model – Ed] to a select group of dealers. These are heavily Authentic-inspired instruments that had some unique features. Our pledge with this group of highly capable dealers – we call them 'Custom Experts' because they have close and long-standing relationships with the Custom Shop – was to regularly introduce unique products. But not instruments that are so esoteric that the world doesn't want them or that the dealers won't be able to sell them, but things that either they request or we believe might fall into their spectrum of preferences. And we had great success out of the gate with those 28-style instruments.

> "There are no weird angles to apologise for, no Gumby effect on the headstock…"
> ***Scott Sasser***

"When the following year started to come around, we had to determine what's next, and among many possibilities was this Super Dreadnought shape. We kind of took a leap of faith. And, at the time, was anybody asking for an even larger Dreadnought? No, but it was so cool when it made it into the hands of players around the factory, and into the hands of some guests that visited, that we were like, 'You know? This could be something. So let's take a chance.'

"We figured there'd be some bluegrass players or some Americana, roots-rock strummers that would really like it. But once it started showing up in the hands of some of these Expert dealers, it pleasantly surprised us by crossing genres – I mean, we've got fingerstyle guys who are used to playing triple Os and OM guitars [who are now really into the Super Dreadnought]. Have you seen the video produced by Russo Music? Well, the guitarist [who did the video demonstration, Scott Rieger] was just such a phenomenal player. When he opened the box, he grabbed the guitar and after the very first strum he just stopped and said, 'I gotta tell you, I was absolutely prepared to hate this guitar – you described it to me as an even bigger Dreadnought. And it's everything that I would never have chosen for myself.' But he was absolutely blown away by it, and he fell in love with the koa version."

The Super Dreadnought is currently a Custom Shop guitar, but can you see it becoming a Standard production model at any point in the future?

Scott: "It will very likely see the light of day as a Standard Line product [in due course], just as we have a triple-0 or an OM or D-28. The Super D could be a body shape that appears in the 18 family or the 28 family or you name it. I mean, Martin has earned the right to experiment and have some fun. And just because we've made instruments in the 30s and 40s that the world is still hungry for, it doesn't mean we can't explore the boundaries. Tim and his group did just that – they were able to grow [the Dreadnought shape into an even larger instrument] and it looks so organic. It's absolutely proportional in the body shape, down to the soundholes – because the soundhole is proportionally larger. So there are no weird angles to apologise for, no Gumby effect on the headstock or anything oddball that everybody would raise their eyebrows at."

Tim: "The Super D doesn't look exceptionally large until you see a Dreadnought Junior, then a regular Dreadnought and a Super Dreadnought all lined up together. It's a nice cohesive sizing."

Martin is often regarded as a tradition-based brand. How does the Super Dreadnought fit into the heritage?

Tim: "We have an internal group that meets on capital [expenditure] requests, so when it came to actually putting the Super Dreadnought into production, I needed to go to the capital meeting and request money

4

for it. I started explaining what the guitar was and I used the term Super Dreadnought. As soon as I did that, Chris Martin looked up and he said, 'Super Dreadnought?' I'm like, 'Yeah,' and he's like, 'Where do I sign?' He started to explain the reason he was so intrigued from a historical standpoint, is that the original Dreadnought was named after a class of battleship. He said, 'I don't know if you know this, but after that first Dreadnought class of battleship was put into service they commissioned a new class and that new class was called the Super Dreadnought.' From his standpoint, he was just like, 'Yeah, this is a natural progression of the instrument.'

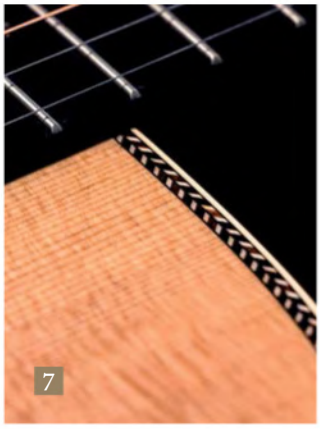
"The sound truly has that character of a gunship, just from a nuts and bolts standpoint. When we started looking at the response of the instrument compared with a standard Dreadnought our sound guy – who was working in a controlled environment in our sound room – was getting a reading on the bass side that was up to 12dB hotter. And then on the treble and the mids he's getting anywhere from, say, 5dB to 8dB hotter. That's significant because when we were testing the Liquid Metal bridge pins, we thought those were quite impressive. Those little pins can induce a 2dB to 3dB increase over a standard plastic pin... so to have something averaging about a 6dB to 9dB bump over the whole guitar, that's super impressive."

Scott: "Jason Isbell was around the factory a couple of weeks back and he played the prototype. Even with its strings that had been collecting funk for a couple of months, hanging in the rafters over Tim's head there, he gave it a strum and he's like, 'Man, that really hits you right in the chest.' He played it for an hour, with crappy strings and all, but he just wouldn't let it go.

"That [powerful hike in volume] is real and has proven to not just be real to exceptional players like Jason but for average players, too. You can feel the instrument vibrating [more powerfully], but you can do that without having to put more effort into the instrument. It's a bigger speaker, that's essentially what it is. It works like the difference between a good bookshelf speaker and its standing-speaker counterpart from the same manufacturer."

When you make an acoustic guitar bigger, you can either make its perimeter larger or increase its depth – or both. But if you increase depth, you risk making the guitar hard to reach over and thus unergonomic. How did you manage those factors with the Super Dreadnought?

"That's a great question. You know, we play with depths for different effects, and we do have what's called a thin-body Dreadnought. I think we did one for Beck and then there's a couple of other ones we did. Typically, you'll get a little less bass and a little more mids that'll be perceived. In the case of the Super D, one thing I did not want to do is go any deeper. And the reason for that was I thought I was gonna get enough bass just from the perimeter enlargement. But the other reason is because I didn't want people trying to reach over this thing to feel like it's an even further reach [than on a standard Dreadnought]. And I think that worked to our benefit, in the sense that we got a bass boost that was more than expected, which was awesome. We got an output volume higher than expected, which was great. But then we



5. The inlaid pearl Martin logo reminds you these are high-end Custom Shop guitars– but the SD may become a standard model

6. The proportions of the SD have been carefully designed to look natural and not oversize

7. Tim Teel designed a new yet classic-looking herringbone pattern for the purfling

also have a guitar that, even though it's bigger in profile, is still very comfortable. As Scott alluded to earlier, some real-world players wanted to hate the thing because they thought it was going to be this huge, huge guitar. But no – and in my opinion, I think it's just as easy to play as any other Dreadnought we have."

How did you make sure that, in gaining an increase in volume, you didn't lose any dynamics and detail when playing more softly?

Tim: "There is a typical bracing formula that we use, but I massaged it a little bit, knowing some of the background on what we develop for other guitars and what works and what doesn't. So the bracing pattern, in and of itself, is a new pattern for us because it's a different shape and it's in a slightly different placement. But if you were thinking, 'Is it forward-shifted?' Well, it's a new body size, it's a Super Dreadnought – so there is no forward or rearward shift [relative to traditional placement] – it is what it is. However, it is closer to the 'one inch from the soundhole' dimension that everybody's looking for. Although the soundhole itself is just a little bit larger; it's not a large soundhole, it's just a tiny bit bigger. Our normal soundhole size is four inches and this is four and an eighth [of an inch], which means there's a 16th-on-each-side enlargement, and overall diameter [enlargement] is an eighth of an inch, whereas a large soundhole would probably double that increase in size."

> "We had to ensure we weren't limited by materials for the back's 'wingspan'"
>
> ***Scott Sasser***

You've debuted the Super Dreadnought with a choice of Guatemalan rosewood or koa for its body and Sitka spruce for the top. Will the Super D design also work well with other tonewood combinations?

Tim: "I can tell you it works great on mahogany, it works great on East Indian rosewood, though Scott has chosen two woods in particular for the Custom Expert models and he also needed to do a three-piece back. That was not because it's based on a D-35, as far as typical '35' features go, but because of wood availability..."

Scott: "We had to ensure we didn't reach a point in manufacturing where we were limited by materials for the 'wingspan' of the Super Dreadnought's back. So, yeah, we had material on hand and it could have been a two-piece back. But, instead, looking a little forward into the future and understanding how we are sometimes limited by what Mother Nature provides, it made practical sense to do it as a three-piece back so that we wouldn't have to halt production at any point and use a different material on a brand-new instrument that we were trying to build confidence among dealers with.

"As Tim mentioned, the rosewood performed very well and mahogany was a strong performer, too. But I wanted something that was a little more upscale. So we have the Guatemalan rosewood variant that's on the street now and, sonically, koa is always equated with some of the most desirable characteristics of mahogany. So I knew I could deliver an instrument that looked great in koa while maintaining the same price point that we had with Guatemalan rosewood, so we would be able to help the dealers say, 'Here are your two choices. They're the same price, which do you want?'

"I just wanted to offer [two guitars] with great eye-appeal but let the price be the same... we know we're going to be able to please customers' ears, but if they're going to buy with their eyes, let's just give them the choice. 'Here they are: A or B, they're the same price – which do you think you can't live without?'"

As far as larger acoustics go, most people's reference point is a J-200. How does the Super Dreadnought compare to that?

Tim: "Yeah, so a J-200 in my head is more equivalent to our Grand Jumbo, which has a 17-inch body. Those two are more similar to me than what a J-200 would be to a Super Dreadnought – sound and everything. I mean, to me, what makes more sense is that this is a Dreadnought, a guitar we all know and love, but turned up to 12 – one past 11!" G

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Longtermers

A few months' gigging, recording and everything that goes with it – welcome to *Guitarist*'s longterm test report

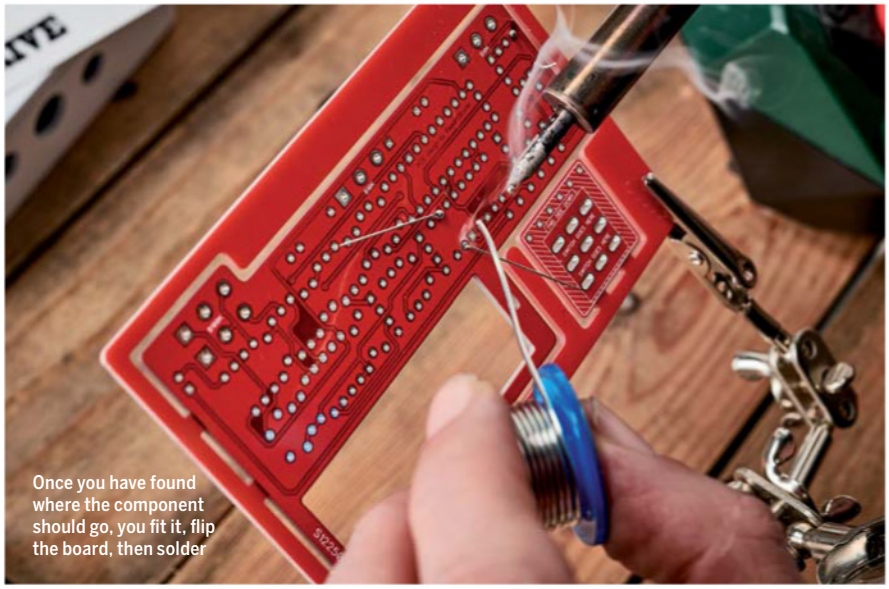
StewMac Ghost Drive Pedal Kit

with Jamie Dickson

Writer

JAMIE DICKSON
Guitarist, Editor-in-chief

As Jamie readies his tools and new soldering iron for its first outing to work on the Ghost Drive, he's reminded of some important factors to consider when the iron is hot…



Once you have found where the component should go, you fit it, flip the board, then solder

As someone once said, never work with children or animals – or soldering irons. Okay, they didn't say that last bit, but they probably should have. As regular readers will know, I recently took on the project of building a Klon-based overdrive kit made by US lutherie parts supplier StewMac. Unlike my first DIY foray into pedal-building years ago, the kit was supplied with a comprehensive manual and video lessons on the StewMac YouTube channel. So the process should be relatively foolproof. But as we like to test things thoroughly here at *Guitarist*, it's only appropriate that I should start the build by doing something foolish.

Keen to show readers how the process works, art editor Darren suggests we shoot me soldering components onto the circuit board at our photography studio with snapper Olly Curtis taking pics over my shoulder. A little table is set up in a photography bay

> "Pleased with my impeccable prep, I then realise I have failed to remove the iron's plastic guard"

onto which I neatly lay out all the parts and set up my brand-new soldering iron. As I get everything ready I switch on the soldering iron to warm it up in readiness for 'tinning' the tip – coating it in a preparatory layer of solder – before using it for the first time. As it gets nice and toasty, I sort through the various resistors, capacitors and diodes, looking for the first two parts the manual says I should solder onto the board – two germanium diodes.

This kit's circuit board has diagrams of where each part goes printed onto its surface, which also indicate which way round polarity-sensitive components should be fitted. As I inspect this, I set up a little 'helping hands' angled clamp (with an integral magnifying glass) to hold the circuit board steady while I apply solder. It will also allow me to flip the workpiece in order to fit the component through one side then solder it on the other.

Pleased with my impeccable preparedness, I reach for the soldering iron to tin its tip and set to work. Only then do I realise I have failed to remove the little plastic guard the new iron was shipped with on its tip… which is now sizzling merrily. Pulling it off swiftly, hardly burning myself at all, I inspect the tip. It actually seems quite clean. Maybe the plastic didn't get hot enough to melt? My subsequent attempts to tin the soldering iron tip put an end to this optimism, however.

Balls of hot solder are now rolling off the tip like water off a Mallard's bum. Although the tip appears clean, it seems likely a fine layer of insulating plastic now coats it thanks to my famous attention to detail. I power down and cool the whole thing off then try to clean it by rubbing with a moist cloth. This does about as much as you'd expect, which is to say nothing, and after a few more abortive attempts to tin the tip I switch the iron off again.

The soldering iron manual clearly states you should never clean the tip with abrasives, but they probably weren't thinking someone would fuse molten plastic onto it. Though I don't recommend trying this at home, I decided to use very fine wet-and-dry paper to gently clean the tip. This time, it works and the tip accepts tinning, though there's clearly a little bit of remaining plastic residue being cooked off as I do so. What a good start!

Feeling The Heat

This minor debacle behind me, I set to work soldering in the first components. It's been a while since I've soldered anything as fine as these little microelectronics parts and I hold the iron on my first solder joint a little too long. The resulting joint seems okay, but it's a reminder to be careful not to scorch the circuit board or risk heat-damage to the components themselves. It's delicate timing, as we're only talking about a second or two between 'just right' and 'too much'.

The joint looks bright, however, which is good – but the nice, low conical shape that is the mark of a professionally applied solder joint is not quite there. I'm on the lookout for rough-textured or ball-like joints that sit proud of the circuit board that might indicate an unreliable 'cold joint' or too much solder. Also worth avoiding are what one might call 'pixie hat' joints, where the stumpy conical shape you're after is drawn out into a spindly cone that doesn't firmly adhere to the terminal. This may indicate the terminal itself wasn't heated enough and wetted properly with solder and could be an unreliable joint in future. But these problems can typically be fixed by careful reapplication of the iron.

Soldering in the next couple of diodes, I fall into the trap of making not-ideal joints along the lines described above – my technique is clearly rather rusty! With the camera clicking away, I finally apply a bit too much solder close to a joint I've already soldered and the solder jumps across the gap, causing a short. That'll need to be reheated and the annoying solder 'bridge' between the two terminals removed with a solder pump – a simple but essential tool that lets you suck up unwanted solder (after reheating) and start afresh.

After this interesting but somewhat shoddy start, I park it there and reflect on next steps. Soldering, like any skill, needs to be used frequently to remain sharp. and I'm already thinking a finer-tipped iron would be helpful. That said, I'm enjoying the process and, if I continue at home with full concentration (rather than acting as a hand model in a photoshoot while working), I think I can refine my technique. Certainly, I don't think I've screwed anything up beyond redoing. I'm looking forward to getting the rest of it looking a lot more squared away. And, hopefully, functional. See you next time. G

Reviewed *N/A* ***Price*** *£109* ***On Test Since*** *September 2022* ***Studio Session*** *Got to build it first!* ***Gigged*** *See previous remark…* ***www.stewmac.com***

BOUGHT & SOLD

DOMINIC MILLER

The Sting guitarist mourns a long-lost Gibson ES-335 and reveals a fondness for 60s Telecasters

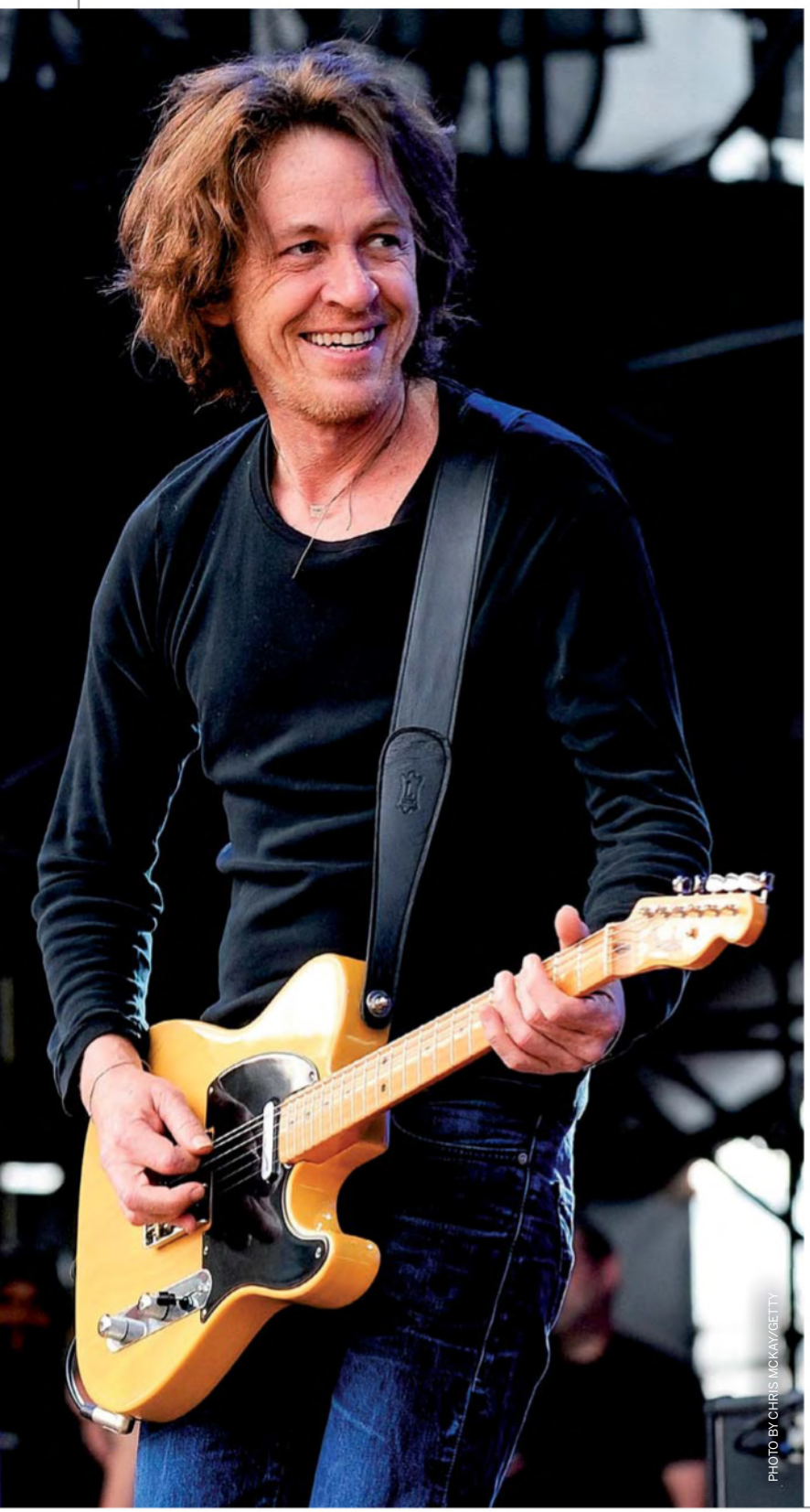


PHOTO BY CHRIS MCKAY/GETTY

What was the first serious guitar you bought with your own money?

"I bought a Gibson 335 in 1981. There were a bunch of guitar players who played 335s in those days – it was *de rigueur* to have a 335 because of Larry Carlton. Everybody wanted to sound like Larry Carlton and I was no different. I can't remember how much it cost – probably about 350 or maybe 500 quid. That was the market value in those days. And then I sold it like a mug.

"Before then I was just using acoustic guitars. I had an Ovation, the Glen Campbell Ovation, and another one I can't remember. Just two different Ovations. I was really into them because I wanted to be like Al Di Meola and John McLaughlin, you know? I also had a bunch of Spanish guitars. I always had good classical guitars, but they were, like, run of the mill – you know, 200 quid guitars."

What was the last guitar you bought?

"The last guitar I bought was a 1968 Fender Telecaster. I bought it in Los Angeles about six months ago. I always wanted to have one with a maple neck and I found one – that's the most money I've ever spent on guitar, for sure. It's like a wild animal that you need to tame. That's what I like about them, they have so much character. Everything works well together. I love the balance of the neck and the body; it seems to pick up all kinds of overtones from everywhere, more than a Strat does. I don't know why

> "My '68 Tele is like a wild animal you need to tame. The better the instrument, the harder it is to make it sound good immediately"

because I've always been a Strat kind of guy; I just wanted to play a Tele because I've been using Bill Nash Teles for a long time now. But then I thought, 'Why don't I treat myself to a real one?' When I first picked it up, I thought it's not as good as the Nash, but then cut to six months later and it's actually 10 times better, I think, because I've learned how to play it. The sound didn't come to me immediately. I had to find it. I think the better the instrument, the harder it is to make it sound good immediately."

What's the most incredible find or bargain you've ever had when buying guitars?

"I was in New York and there was this guitar shop in Soho. I saw this Gibson SG in the window, which was kind of green with one pickup. It looked so ugly – I felt like I was in a pet shop and it was the ugly dog that nobody wants, and it was only $500 or $600. I think it had been sitting in the

DOMINIC'S GO-TO RIG

"I've got a few guitars. Principally, it's the '68 Tele, then I've got the two Nash backups, and I use a Chet Atkins nylon-string guitar. Those are the guitars I'm using for this tour. I use two Mesa/Boogie Lone Star amps with two 2x12 cabs. The guitar is going into a pedalboard with a bunch of very garden variety pedals. I go into a Boss Compressor Sustainer, then I've got either the Maxon or the Ibanez Tube Screamer. I like to use a flanger as well, and/or a phaser, depending on my feeling that day. I also use a tremolo pedal and I've got a wah-wah pedal, too. I use the Line 6 delays, an Ernie Ball volume pedal and, of course, the important pedal is the Boss Chorus pedal and I run it in stereo. Running that pedal in stereo, it's really mega and the front-of-house guy obviously gives me a good sound out front."

shop for ages because nobody wanted an olive green SG with one pickup. So I bought it and gave it to my daughter Misty. 500 bucks? I'm sure it's worth more than that. And it sounds great."

Have you ever sold a guitar that you now intensely regret letting go off?

"Yeah, well, I sold the 335 and I totally regret that because it was such a good guitar. But I was skint at the time. I part-traded it in for a white Strat, which I never really liked. But I just needed the money. I've been looking for it ever since. You know, it might show up somewhere. I thought that maybe I'll see somebody playing it in a club or something."

What's the strongest case of buyer's remorse you've ever had after buying gear?

"Probably the Akai S1000. I thought, 'I've got to have an S1000, everyone's got one.' This was when I started doing more studio stuff. I bought it because it's a sampler and wow, it could do three seconds [sample time]. I thought, 'This is amazing!' I mean, now you can do that on your phone. But it was a total waste of money because I never used it. Well, maybe I used it once. And I didn't get the same money back that I paid for it. I paid too much money for it. It just looked cool in my rack."

What's your best guitar-buying tip?

"I can categorically say that the best advice I can give is play an electric guitar acoustically for half an hour before you plug it in and establish a relationship with it. If you can get a good sound out of a guitar acoustically, there's a very good chance it's going to sound good when you plug it in."

When was the last time you stopped to stare in a guitar shop window or browsed online and what were you looking at?

"I don't qualify on that nerd level [laughs]. However, when I see guitars in a shop window, I do get that sort of euphoria that I used to get when I was a kid. Very often it's not a music shop, it's probably a pawn shop. I like to see guitars that stick out randomly in an antique store or junk store, and whatever it is, it gives me that same endorphin rush."

If forced to make a choice, would you rather buy a really good guitar and a cheap amp or a cheap guitar on a top-notch amp?

"A really good guitar and a cheap amp, for sure. It's a no-brainer. You find yourself with whatever gear you've got. You know, you give Jeff Beck a tennis racket and a transistor radio, he'll make it sound perfect. The amp helps you, it does exactly what it says on the label – it *amplifies* what you're doing. The guitar is going to make the sound. So I would always go for a good guitar over a good amp."

If you could only use humbuckers or single coils for the rest of your career, which would you choose and why?

"I don't really understand how pickups work, to be honest with you. I would probably say single coils: I'm more of a single coil kind of guy. There's something a bit more kind of dangerous about the sound of a single-coil pickup. But it all depends on the guitar, you know? If I've got humbuckers or single coils I'll work towards what I've got. I'll find the sound I'm looking for. So I don't really have a preference. But if I had to make a finite choice, it would be a single-coil pickup, because I just find them a little bit more volatile." **[DM]**

Dominic is currently midway through a world tour with Sting and will be releasing a solo album on the ECM label in spring 2023
www.dominicmiller.com

Dominic playing a custom built Yairi RAG65. Apart from being in Sting's band for the past 33 years, Dominic has produced a string of solo albums that feature his acoustic playing

PHOTO BY CHRISTOPH BOMBERT

The MOD SQUAD

THE FINISH LINE

With the StewMac offset kit-build complete, including quite a few custom touches, Dave Burrluck now has to apply a finish. But which one will he go for?

Having taken a reverse approach to this kit-build, in that I built it all first before I applied any finish, I now have to 'unbuild' it so I can apply a finish to the mahogany body and plain maple neck. It seemed like a blooming good idea at the time because – to put it somewhat bluntly – if the final guitar wasn't very inspiring, then I wouldn't need to spend time and money finishing it myself or indeed calling in a professional.

The thing is, I've taken a bit of a diversion from StewMac's instructions: I've ditched the supplied scratchplate and made a couple of separate Perspex plates for the toggle switch and the volume, tone and output jack, leaving the central 'swimming pool' rout open. I then loaded in a pair of Fender Jazzmaster pickups and, via a small screw-in connector block, I can actually fit any pickups I want in the future without using a soldering iron (so long as they will direct-mount to the body). Inspired or plain daft? That's the beauty of doing things for yourself.

Since the guitar was still assembled, I put any thoughts of finishing to the back of my mind while I just enjoyed StewMac's and my own building efforts [pic 1]. What started as a £165 kit has turned out to be a rather nice instrument. There's good resonance, ring and sustain, for starters, and it plays pretty well, too. Also, while Jazzmasters can be weighty, this one isn't. The pickups certainly produce the bright-edged, jangling voice I was hoping for as I didn't really get on with the perfectly good P-90 soapbars that were supplied with the kit, which were a bit too 'rock'.

In the 'cons' column there are no side-markers on the fingerboard, the neck shaping before it meets the body heel is a little rudimentary, and that body heel itself is a little sharp-edged. So if those cons bother you, you need to fix 'em before you apply a finish. In the meantime, what finish am I going to use?

Choice Abounds

Like every other material or part you need to mod or indeed *make* your own guitar today, it's the huge choice on offer that can prevent us from doing anything. It's no different with finishing. From spray-can nitro to coloured finishing kits, not to mention natural and coloured stains (water-based and spirit-based), oils and potions, gilding waxes and so on, the options for 'domestic' finishing are vast. I've spent plenty of time on Google. It's wise to try out your colour and process on some sample wood first, but I don't have any waste mahogany lying around – and, in fact, an awful lot of the products I've found seem designed for light-coloured woods, not mahogany. A vivid blue stain over an ash or alder body will look a lot brighter than if it was applied over a darker mahogany.

Of course, there is plenty of advice on the internet. StewMac even gives comprehensive directions of spray-can finishing in the instructions of this offset kit (you can download the PDF of these, too).

Royal Visit

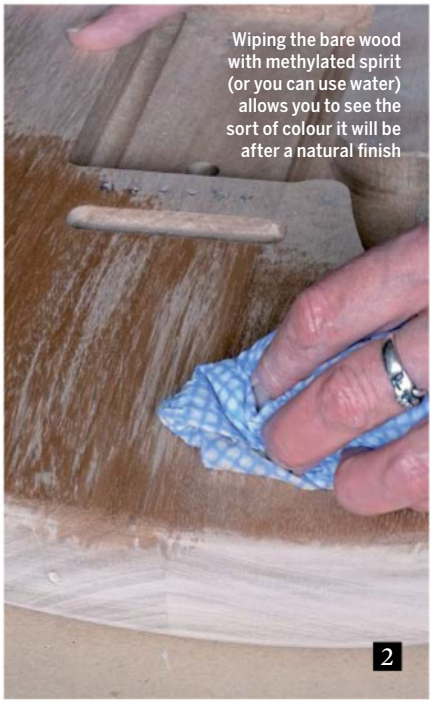
Another problem I now face is that I've committed to finishing this project in time for this particular issue of *Guitarist*. While you can take as long as you want on a build, our magazine deadlines don't budge, and all too soon I'm feeling the sort of pressure a guitar maker might experience when they've committed a date to a customer.

A visit to Mod Squad HQ from UK guitar-making royalty – PJD and UK Guitar Builders' founder, Leigh Dovey, plus PJD's head of sales, Matt Dunn, who popped in to drop off a pair of Chapman guitars (see page 14) – gives me an opportunity for a second opinion and, hopefully, some advice from the pros. Once we have the business out of the way (and a couple of teas later), I hand Matt the StewMac offset and plug him in while I describe the backstory. Of course, usually I'm the one evaluating one of *their* guitars; now the tables have turned, so I'm relieved that, like me, Leigh and Matt don't think the guitar is too shabby.

> "What started as a £165 kit has turned out to be a rather nice instrument that plays pretty well"

I ask for some advice on finishing – I have half an idea to apply some kind of silver finish. "Would you like us to spray one of our thin nitro silver finishes for you?" offers Leigh. Well, yes, I flipping well would, but that'd be cheating... so I politely decline. We then dab on a bit of methylated spirits (denatured alcohol) to simulate what a natural finish would look like and the plain, almost light dirty-pink of the mahogany instantly adopts a deeper, reddy-brown colour that we associate with the wood [pic 2]. We all agree it looks pretty good and Leigh suggests Osmo Polyx-Oil, which

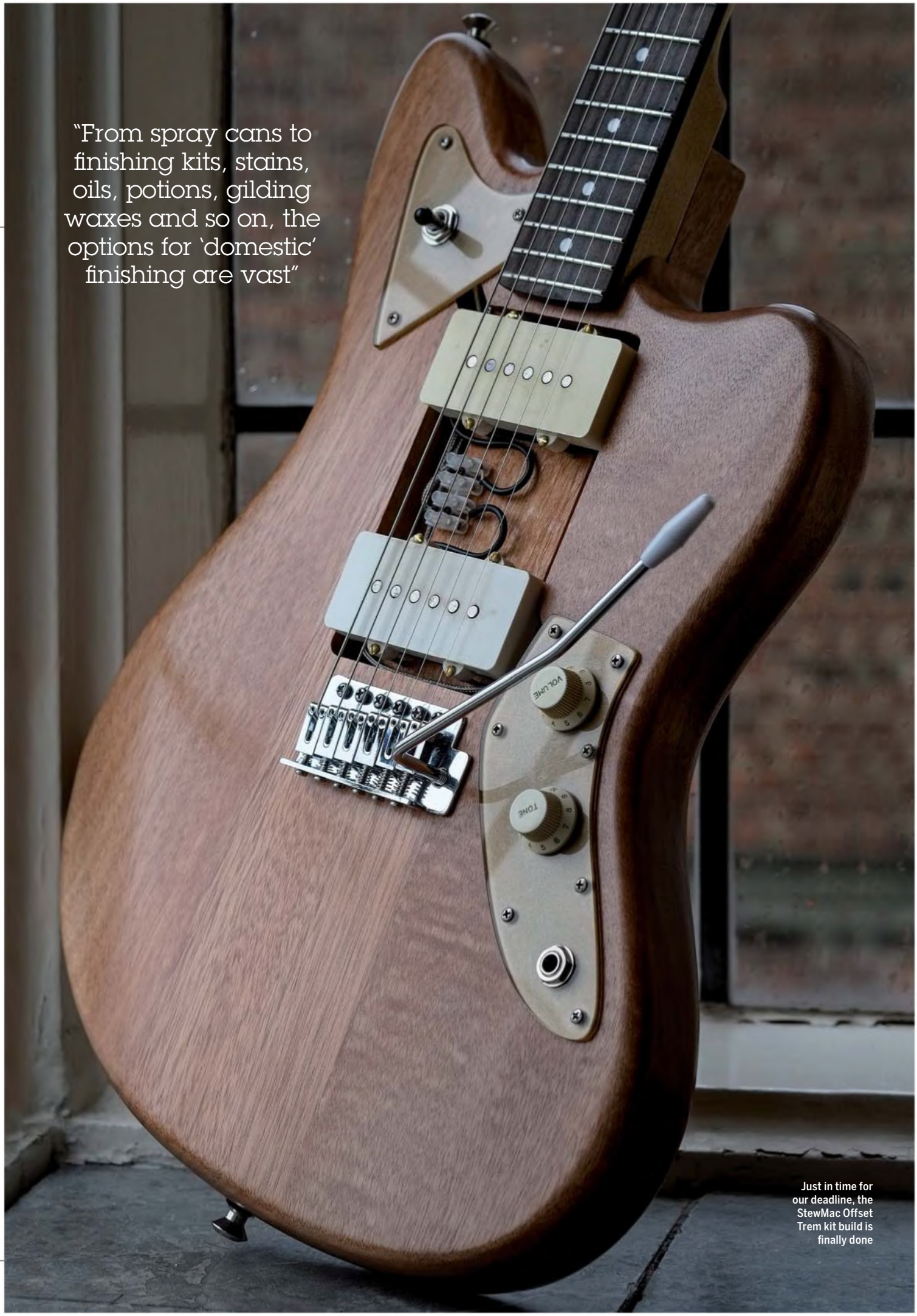
1 The guitar might not yet have a finish, but it's fully functional and sounding good



2 Wiping the bare wood with methylated spirit (or you can use water) allows you to see the sort of colour it will be after a natural finish

PHOTOS BY DAVE BURRLUCK

"From spray cans to finishing kits, stains, oils, potions, gilding waxes and so on, the options for 'domestic' finishing are vast"



Just in time for our deadline, the StewMac Offset Trem kit build is finally done

3. Once disassembled you need to carefully do your final sanding

4. Make sure those curved edges are perfectly smooth, too

rings a few bells until I remember that's what luthier Patch Rubin uses on his rather beautiful Wide Sky guitars.

We then discuss the neck, which, unlike the sumptuous figured and roasted maple that Leigh and team UKGB use, is very white and a little on the anaemic-looking side. We talk about applying a light golden stain followed by a Tung or Danish oil, something I'm more familiar with and exactly what I'd used on a previous Wilkinson kit-build maple neck. That neck has darkened with age and use, too, and has a burnished bare-wood feel, which isn't a million miles away from the finish that Seth Baccus uses, Leigh observes. After Leigh and Matt have left, I realise I have a plan... and one that, with any luck, I can achieve in time for our deadline.

Disassembly & Finish Prep

The beauty of my inspired (or should that be 'daft'?) idea means that to disassemble the guitar, aside from unsoldering the bridge earth wire, all I need are a couple of screwdrivers, which, considering my time constraints, is a godsend. As is Wood Finishes Direct who delivers my Osmo Polyx-Oil some 27 hours after I place my order.

I resand the body up to 600-grit [pics 3 & 4], then give it a light wipe with a damp cloth. When fully dry, it's time for another sand with the same grit: it feels super smooth. Obviously, you need to consider how you're going to hold and apply a body with a wet finish to dry for the quoted eight to 10 hours. So I cut a couple of pieces of waste 2x1 so they fit in the spring cavity, which, when laid on their edges, allows me to lay the body on its back without touching my baseboard. Effectively, I could apply the finish, with a small brush, back first, lay the body on

5. Applying the finish to the body, back first

6. With the body flipped over and supported above the baseboard you can apply the finish to the front

7. You'll need to let it dry for some time. Note the infeasibly small (125ml) tin of finish, but it's more than enough for two coats on our body

PHOTOS BY DAVE BURRLUCK

8. Applying a light amber stain to the neck

9. After the stain is dry you can now start applying the finish oil

10. The side dots were installed using 2mm rod and a dab of PVA glue

those 'rests' and apply the finish to the top and sides [pics 5, 6 & 7]. Don't apply too much, that's the danger – and I think I have... It's late October (I daren't put the heating on!) and it takes 24 hours to fully dry. (A tip that Leigh later tells me is, after applying that first quite wet coat, you should wipe off the excess with a clean cloth to make the drying time quicker).

It looks like I've missed a couple of places, but it's more likely that's just how the finish has soaked into softer, perhaps more absorbent areas. I lightly cut back with 800-grit, brush and wipe off any dust, and apply a lighter second coat, this time with a piece of cloth – an old cotton sheet. Second time around the dry-time is much quicker. Finally, I very lightly cut back the dry coat with a fine abrasive pad and apply some hard carnauba and buff that with a microfibre cloth.

"You need to consider how you're going to hold and apply a body with a wet finish, then let it dry for eight to 10 hours"

A quick application of clear shellac sanding sealer in the rear spring cavity and that swimming pool rout dries much more quickly and pretty much completes the job. It's not Custom Shop quality, but it's not looking – or feeling – too bad.

By now, I'm running seriously short of time and I still have the neck to go. I wipe on a little pine-coloured stain (diluted two-to-one with white spirit) just to add a little golden yellow-y base colour [pic 8]. But what does Seth Baccus do, I wonder? "I wipe on the oil; I mainly just use kitchen towel," he tells me. "The first coat is a little wetter – I'll usually apply four to seven coats and let it dry for a couple of days. Then I cut it back a little with wire wool then use a finishing wax." Gotcha. [pic 9]

NO SIDE DOTS?

Our fingerboard doesn't have any. What to do?

Rather oddly, our StewMac offset kit neck doesn't have any side-position markers. For an at-home player that's perhaps a bit less of an issue, but for a guitar you may intend to gig, strapped on, side dots might be handy (and not least considering a Jazzmaster hangs a little differently compared with a Stratocaster).

In reality, it's not difficult to install some 2mm plastic rod, so long as you can accurately mark, centre punch and then drill the necessary holes. You can then put in a blob of PVA glue with a cocktail stick, push in the 2mm plastic rod (you don't need more than 5mm in length) and nip off with a pair of wire cutters. Leave to dry then you can file or sand the protruding ends smooth. Unless you're really careful, the side dots might not be quite as straight lined as you'll find on a factory build, but, hey, this is The Mod Squad, not the Fender Custom Shop.

11. On the new scratchplate are mini CTS pots, Orange Drop tone cap and Pure Tone output jack

12. The second scratchplate holds the toggle switch

13. An early upgrade to our kit build were these Gotoh vintage-style tuners

14. After all our hard work, here's the finished (and indeed *finished*) instrument

Final Thoughts

Building a guitar from a kit – or indeed a selection of parts – is certainly doable in a domestic environment. But things can get borderline when it comes to the finishing process, which, depending on what you use, will probably need to be done outside or certainly in a well-ventilated area. For many, that might be a dealbreaker, so figuring out how you'd finish a kit such as this is really the *first* thing to consider before you buy it.

And let's not forget the time you'll spend. You might not have actually done the woodworking of the neck and body, but with the fettling of those parts, the fretwork and so on, even if you stick to the standard kit you begin to get some idea of the hand-time involved in actually putting a guitar together. To be honest, I lost count. Like any household DIY project, estimate the time you think you'll take... then add on at least 50 per cent more.

> "Figuring out how you'd finish a kit like this is really the *first* thing to consider before you buy it"

But whatever diligent kit-build you choose – with or without Frankenstein-like experimental diversions – it's not somebody else's guitar, it's uniquely yours.

WHAT'S THE COST?

We may have added a pair of donated Jazzmaster pickups to our build and 'bits box' finds such as control knobs, plus some Danish oil and carnauba wax from stock (small tins of both last ages), but otherwise this is what we spent...

- StewMac Offset Trem Guitar Kit: £165 (at time of writing)

  Shipping (exc. import taxes etc): £86
  www.stewmac.com
- Gotoh SD91 tuners: approx. £48

  Gotoh 10.2mm conversion bushings x6: £12.95

  CTS 550k mini pots x2: £13.90

  Switchcraft 'short frame' toggle switch: £23.95

  Sprague Orange Drop .047 microfarads capacitor: £5.95
  www.wdmusic.co.uk
- Clear acrylic sheet – 350 x 250mm x 3mm: £10.58
  www.theplasticman.co.uk
- Brass slot-head wood screws x8 (approx. £0.42 each; inc VAT and delivery): £3.36
  www.westfieldfastners.co.uk
- Connector block: £1.80

  Nissan Gold car spray paint: £9.99
  www.halfords.com
- Osmo Polyx-Oil 125ml: £11.20 (inc delivery)
  www.wood-finishes-direct.com
- Plastic side dot inlay material, 2mm diameter: £2.99
  www.northwestguitars.co.uk

TOTAL SPEND: £395.67

That should give you something to think about till our next issue. In the meantime, if you have any modding questions, or suggestions, drop us a line – The Mod Squad.

PHOTOS BY DAVE BURRLUCK

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Guitarist

Huw Price's **Nitty Gritty**

The versatile Filter'Tron has been charming guitarists since the late 1950s

Filter'Tron Pickups

It's astonishing that Chet Atkins, George Harrison, Neil Young, Steven Stills, Malcom Young, Pete Townshend and Brian Setzer all relied on the same pickup to achieve some of their greatest tones. Whether it's country fingerstyle picking, 60s rock, indie jangle, power pop or classic rock, the Filter'Tron can do it all. Even so, this particular pickup fell out of favour for over a decade after music became heavier and louder, and players became sustain-obsessed. The main issue was that they were exclusive to hollowbodied Gretsch guitars that were largely unsuited to the latest trends.

In the early 1980s, a Long Island greaser called Brian Setzer brought his virtuoso chops to the rockabilly revival and made Gretsch guitars cool again. Goths and indie players followed suit, with the likes of Billy Duffy, Kirk Brandon, Roddy Frame, Ian McNabb and Johnny Marr breaking new sonic ground. When Fred Gretsch relaunched the family firm during the 1990s, pickup manufacturers gradually got in on the Filter'Tron act. And these days, it's possible to retrofit Filter'Trons into a wide variety of guitars without making major modifications.

Getting 'Bucked

Was the first humbucker Seth Lover's Gibson PAF or the Filter'Tron Ray Butts designed for Chet Atkins? The actual answer is neither. The 'humbucking' principle had its origin in transformer manufacturing and was employed by the tape machine company Ampex for hum-cancelling record heads, and microphone manufacturer Electro-Voice. The first humbucking pickups actually appeared in the late 1930s and were used by Baldwin, Vega and others, while Les Paul reportedly employed hum-cancelling dummy coils and wound his own stacked humbuckers back in the 1940s.

Seth Lover had already used a humbucking circuit in the power supply choke of an amplifier he designed for Gibson and understood that the same technique could be applied to pickups. Meanwhile, over in Cairo, Illinois, Ray Butts was busy working on a humbucking pickup design of his own. Ray had established his reputation as a custom amp builder, and his Echosonic amplifiers featured an integrated tape machine to replicate the studio echo effects popularised by Les Paul and Sam Phillips. They sounded excellent, and Ray's tape echo design was so innovative that Mike Battle and Don Dixon basically copied it to develop the Maestro Echoplex. Clearly, Ray was well versed in tape technology and later confirmed that the Ampex hum-cancelling record head inspired his pickup design.

The single-coil Dynasonic was Gretsch's main pickup before the Filter'Tron was devised by Ray Butts

> Chet Atkins, George Harrison, Malcom Young and Brian Setzer all relied on the same pickup

Prior to the official launch of the PAF and Filter'Tron, Ray and Gibson president Ted McCarthy became aware of each other's work. They exchanged some strongly worded correspondence, with McCarthy flexing his corporate muscles and Ray standing his ground. Both pickup designs debuted at the 1957 Summer NAMM Show and there never was a legal showdown.

With several humbucking pickup patents having already been granted, Seth Lover and Ray Butts were eventually awarded theirs for the adjacent coil arrangement. Ray received his patent on 30 June 1959, a month before Seth.

From country fingerstyle to 60s rock, indie jangle, and classic rock, the Filter'Tron can do it all

The crisp yet chunky, harmonically rich sound of the Filter'Tron brought Gretsch's White Falcon to life as never before

1. Filter'Trons were the answer to Chet Atkins' prayers, offering better string-to-string balance and zero hum. They soon began appearing on his signature guitars

2. Independent makers have offered their own takes on the classic Filter'Tron, notably TV Jones, whose pickups appear, in different variants, on Brian Setzer's signature Gretsch models

Filter'Trons' strong magnets and high inductance contribute to their sweet chime and growly twang

Chet's Request

Les Paul and Chet Atkins were guitar-playing superstars in the 1950s. Both players had signature models, with Les endorsing Gibson and Chet Atkins playing Gretsches – in public, at least. Chet was an intelligent and sophisticated man, who was somewhat embarrassed by some of the more hokey 'Western' features on his 6120 signature model. But that was nothing compared with his dislike of Dynasonic pickups.

Unlike Gibson, Gretsch didn't manufacture pickups in-house. Instead, Gretsch bought in DeArmond Dynasonics and Chet struggled to achieve a comfortable string-to-string balance for his thumb-and-fingerpicking playing style. He also felt that the strong Dynasonic magnets compromised sustain. But most of all, he objected to the single coil-hum.

Chet recalled: "I kept telling Ray how unhappy I was. I had to twist my body around to get the guitar in a certain position relative to the amp to get rid of the humming. One day, he came down to Nashville and had this rough-looking pickup on an old guitar. He said, 'How would you like a pickup that doesn't hum?'"

Ray's extensive records and development notes demonstrate that he didn't simply knock up some hum-cancelling pickups on a whim. He recalled showing Chet a humbucking pickup in 1954, and he worked long and hard on the design before Chet finally installed a prototype set with white bobbins in his black 6120 prototype. Chet was first photographed playing the guitar with Ray's pickups at a Grand Old Opry show in September 1956. Around that time, Chet approached Gretsch about using Ray's pickups and Fred Gretsch wrote to Ray requesting samples. With DeArmond selling pickups to the company's competitors, Gretsch's management was already considering other options.

Perhaps wary of ending up in the same predicament, and knowing that Ray Butts was really an inventor and small-scale custom builder, it was agreed that Gretsch would manufacture Ray's pickup design in-house and pay him a royalty. Ray and Jimmie Webster collaborated to develop a production version of the pickup, which was first marketed as the 'Filter'Tron Electronic Guitar Head'.

3

Cover Versions

With Ray's patent pending, the earliest Filter'Trons had plain metal covers, but they soon began stamping 'patent applied for' across the centre bar in block capitals. After the patent was granted, Gretsch must have used up its backlog of covers because the cover stamp wasn't changed to 'U.S. Pat 2892371' until 1960. Gretsch ran out of Filter'Tron covers in the mid-60s and for a short period Filter'Trons were assembled with open top HiLo covers instead.

Vintage 'patent applied for' Filter'Trons are not held in higher esteem than the patent numbered versions. Unlike Gibson humbuckers, there were no differences in the way Filter'Trons were manufactured. When players do express a preference, it's more likely a 1950s versus 1960s thing because Gretsches are so popular with rockabilly players.

Magic Ingredients

Gretsch used semi-transparent nylon bobbins that were significantly smaller than Gibson's. This enables the pole screws of each bobbin to be placed much closer together, which narrows the pickup's area of focus – much like Gibson's later mini-humbuckers. Coils were machine-wound using 42 AWG plain enamel magnet wire and left unpotted.

Examples from the 1950s and 60s tend to read anywhere between 4kohms and 5k due to the limited amount of wire that can be wound onto the bobbins, but don't fooled – Filter'Trons are not weak-sounding pickups. The design has Alnico bar magnets that are double the thickness of the ¼-inch ones Gibson uses. The pole screws are also longer,

4

so Filter'Trons have stronger magnets and higher inductance, which contributes to their sweet chime and growly twang. The type of Alnico may have varied depending on what Gretsch's suppliers had in stock, but the consensus is that Alnico V is ideal. After Baldwin's takeover, they started using cheaper ceramic magnets with fully open covers and pole screws concealed by a plastic cover. This type of Filter'Tron is called a 'blacktop'.

When Gretsch production resumed in Japan, the recommissioned Filter'Trons had 43 AWG wire, ceramic magnets and pole screws with rounded heads, rather than the flat-sided fillister head screws of old. They sound quite loud and aggressive compared with vintage-spec Filter'Trons, and Gretsch reverted to original specs in around 2001.

Twists & Trons

Tom 'TV' Jones remains the biggest name in the Filter'Tron world and once enjoyed a virtual monopoly for aftermarket units. The TV Classic featured some of the refinements Jones felt necessary, including wax potting and altered screw spacing for bridge and neck placement. It's not an exact vintage replica, but its name is justified.

Gretsch began using TV Jones pickups in premium models, and a Setzer signature set followed. A more recent collaboration with Ray Butts' family resulted in the Ray Butts Ful-Fidelity set, which is the closest to a vintage-spec Filter'Tron available from TV Jones or anywhere else. Today, the TV Jones range now includes Filter'Trons that will drop straight into a soapbar P-90 or humbucker-style mount, or that will replace Dynasonics. Other options include the Magna'Tron, Duo'Tron and the Super'Tron – the latter of which is a replica of Gretsch's own bladed Filter'Tron variant. Higher-output options include the Classic Plus and Power'Tron.

These days, TV Jones faces competition from McNelly Pickups in Canada and some fine UK makers, including Mojo, The Creamery, Sunbear, House Of Tone, Monty's and Radioshop. Some also offer variations on the Filter'Tron theme, with a range of sizes and mounting options.

Get Set

Like vintage PAFs, Filter'Trons are extremely sensitive to height and pole-screw settings, and some setup time is needed to get the very best out of them. Start by tightening all the pole screws down fully and then unscrewing each one by half a turn to give you some wiggle room. You can also try setting the pickups to TV Jones' recommended spacings: 4mm between the top of the cover and the bottom of the E strings on the bridge pickup, and 4.7mm at the neck. Some Filter'Trons have height-adjustment screws, but vintage-style versions may need to be shimmed or have foam placed under the baseplate ears.

> It's possible to retrofit Filter'Trons into a wide variety of guitars without major modifications

The tone will get louder and brighter if the pickup is moved closer to the strings, and softer and quieter when the pickup is set further away. Just use your ears and trust your instincts. Once you're happy with the heights, play a barre chord and pick each note as evenly as possible. If a string sounds quieter than the others, turn the corresponding pole screws anti-clockwise to raise it up. Conversely, you can tame an overly loud string by tightening the pole screws. The object is to achieve the most even string-to-string balance that you can, and if your guitar has two Filter'Trons, then you'll need to do this for both pickups. It's time-consuming, but this is the secret to unleashing the midrange growl and squeaky bite that makes Filter'Trons so unique.

Sound Shapers

Zilla Cabs' Paul Gough demystifies the humble baffle, and explores how different types can affect your combo's sound

Back in the early stages of guitar amplification, in the days of the Fender Tweed amps, combos were the norm. Later, with the advent of increased power and the need for volume, the head and cab came into being. It is this period that I find most interesting as the difference between combos and head-and-cab amplifiers seems to go on two different paths. Here, I want to briefly explain how a few key design features can vastly change how an amp sounds in the room.

The rule of thumb when pitting a combo against its head-and-cab variant is that the combo will tend to sound less direct and often more ambient. A lot of this is due to its back-panel and baffle design. The first part is simple: combos are nearly always open-backed as they require good airflow for cooling. A single vent won't work without an inlet for air, and that is nearly always on the back. The second part, the baffle design, is a little more complex. Speaker placement affects the rigidity of a baffle more than you may first think – remember being told to hit a window by the edge rather than in the centre should you want to break it? Well, this is a similar concept. Here, I'm going to focus on the three main types of baffles that are available: floating, front-mounted and fixed. (One thing to note is there is no real consensus or absolute in the naming of these baffle types, so this is my interpretation.)

Floating Baffles

A floating baffle is one in which the baffle is fixed to the cabinet on only two sides. Imagine a Fender Tweed-style amp: you will see the baffle fixed to the cabinet by a row of two or three brass screws situated on the top and bottom edge but none of the other two edges. Along with what is often a thinner baffle itself, this relatively insecure way of fixing the speaker in place offers a lot of scope for movement. The baffle can move relative to the cab, and as a result – quite unlike a 4x12 with a braced baffle – will lose a lot of control and focus, particularly in the lower frequencies.

I'm sure you can imagine that this is a relatively inefficient system because increased volume will increase the movement of the baffle. However, since there are no rights or wrongs in music it has led to some of the most iconic guitar sounds. After all, there is nothing quite like a Fender Tweed.

This 1958 Fender Twin has a floating baffle, which allows for a lot of movement

Front-Mounted Baffles

Next comes what I refer to as a front-mounted baffle (not to be confused with front-mounted speakers). If you look in the back of a lot of combos, such as Fenders, you will often see that the speaker baffle slides in from the front and is mounted on three sides to thin wooden strips or cleats attached to the cab. This is more secure than a floating baffle, so it's a little more rigid, but offers more flex on the baffle than if it were securely fastened on four sides. Marshall would often securely fasten its front-mounted baffle on four sides giving a more rigid baffle and more focused sound. This was possible due to the amplifier chassis being situated on the back (rather than top/front) of the cabinet.

Now, Fender redesigned the chassis placement in the late 50s/early 60s – think of how a Tweed amp tends to have the controls on the back top edge, and how 'brown-panel' amps have controls on the front top edge. This allowed for a slightly more rigid baffle. Meanwhile, similar head-and-cab combinations would often have large (closed-back) speaker cabinets with fixed baffles, which would allow for a much more direct sound and often much greater access to the lower frequencies. It also led to increased control at higher volumes.

Fixed Baffles

The baffles that offer the most rigidity are called fixed baffles. They're securely fixed on all four sides or permanently fixed to the cabinet shell itself using small grooves cut into the cab (known as dado joints). Mesa/Boogie is a good example. Although a lot of its baffles are only fixed on three sides, they are very rigid and often quite thick, too, so they still retain a lot of focus.

By now, it probably won't surprise you that a lot of extension cabinets use a more rigid baffle design, creating a generally more focused, controlled sound. This, mixed with the ability to choose closed-back as an option, is a key factor in how the two formats differ. All this said, if you're choosing which 'fixed' path to take, why not try both and see which you prefer? G

"A combo tends to sound less direct and often more ambient than its head-and-cab variant due to its back-panel and baffle design"

PHOTOCOURTESY OF ZILLACABS

The fixed baffle of this Mesa/Boogie Mark V combo (shown with its grille removed) offers a high level of rigidity

Rod Brakes' Classic Gear

Fender's first foray into Telecaster variants was an upmarket alternative

Fender Telecaster Custom (version 1)

The pictured Telecaster Custom was expertly restored to original spec at ATB Guitars in Cheltenham. By analysing the woodgrain, finish and other details such as neck date and pot codes, the team concluded it is the same prototypical instrument that appeared in Fender literature when the model was released in 1959. Reads the '59 catalogue: "The new Telecaster Custom dual pickup and Esquire Custom single pickup guitar offer all the fine playing and design features of the regular Telecaster and Esquire models plus custom treatment of the body and neck."

Costing $229.50, the Custom Telecaster was touted as a fancier, upmarket alternative to the plain, utilitarian design of the regular $199.50 Tele. This "custom treatment" included a rosewood 'board, three-ply pickguard, bound body, and three-tone sunburst finish. Appearing in '58, the top-of-the-line Jazzmaster was the first Fender solidbody to debut with a rosewood fretboard as standard, followed by the Telecaster and Esquire Customs. However, these models were not outstanding in this respect as one-piece fretted maple necks were superseded by rosewood-'board necks across the entire Fender line in '59. How rosewood 'boards compare with maple in terms of sound and feel will be debated ad infinitum, but they certainly tend to maintain their looks for longer, being darker in colour and lacquer-free. Interestingly, some really early rosewood-'board necks, like the one pictured, have a walnut truss-rod plug and 'skunk stripe' as per the fretted maple necks. This guitar also features an ash body in the style of the regular/Blonde Teles, but such examples are very rare with alder being standard for Custom Teles and Esquires. Again, the effect on sound and feel/vibration is up for debate, but it's an important distinction.

The very earliest Telecaster Customs had a regular Telecaster headstock decal, but within months they were sporting a bespoke "Custom Telecaster" version. Somewhat confusingly, Fender simultaneously referred to the model as a "Telecaster Custom". When the black CBS-era headstock logo appeared in '67, the decal reverted to just "Telecaster". Several other important design alterations happened around that time, including the introduction of chrome-plated 'F' logo tuners and a matching neckplate. But the most significant change in terms of sound arrived with a new circuit configuration that facilitated all three pickup combinations along with full tone control for each. From '67 onwards, Fender listed prices for expanded options – notably a Fender/Bigsby vibrato and maple 'board (though it was possible to custom-order a guitar with a maple 'board prior to this).

> The most significant change in terms of sound arrived with a new circuit configuration

Although Fender experimented with 'top-loader' Tele bridges for a short time between '58 and '59, this guitar has been drilled for through-body stringing

Harder wearing poly finishes began to replace nitro around '68, and by 1970 the one-piece fretted maple neck had returned. By now, the Tele blueprint had been further developed in several different directions, with Mahogany, Rosewood, Paisley Red, Blue Flower and Thinline Teles joining the range. In '71, Fender introduced the Seth Lover-designed Wide Range humbucker by revamping the Thinline with a dual set. Prior to this, all Teles shared identical electronics. Following suit, the original Telecaster Custom design gave way to a non-bound, four-knob, single-coil/humbucker combo guitar in '72 (this second version has a stacked "Telecaster Custom" decal). The dual Wide Range 'bucker Telecaster Deluxe solidbody topped the Tele price list from '73.

The Evolution of the Fender Telecaster Custom

1950
Esquire & Broadcaster released; ash body; fretted maple neck; blonde finish; single-layer pickguard

1951
Dual-pickup Broadcaster renamed Telecaster

Mid-1959
Telecaster & Esquire Customs released; bound alder body; rosewood fretboard; 3-tone sunburst finish

Summer 1959
3-ply 5-screw pickguard changes to 3-ply 8-screw type

1962
Slab rosewood fretboard changes to veneer

1963/'64
Maroon sides (preceded and superseded by black)

1967
Circuit changes to standard 3-way switching with full tone control

Late 1960s
"Fender/Bigsby Tremolo" and maple fingerboard options listed

1970
Fretted maple necks optional; Esquire Custom discontinued

1972
Telecaster Custom discontinued; Telecaster Custom version 2 released

Fender Telecaster Custom (version 1)

1. SERIAL NUMBER
Five-digit number stamped onto neckplate in '58/'59 (though Fender prototypes often have no serial number)

2. HEADSTOCK
Metal string tree; 'spaghetti' Fender logo and "Telecaster" decal; walnut truss-rod plug

3. PLASTICS
Three-layer (w/b/w), five-screw pickguard (repro); black switch tip

4. HARDWARE
'Single-line' Kluson Deluxe tuners; steel bridge plate ('top-loader' standard from late '58 to late '59); three threaded adjustable saddles; two metal strap buttons. Chrome-plated: front pickup cover; 'ashtray' bridge cover; control plate; two knurled knobs; recessed side jack

5. PICKUPS
Two 'black bottom' single-coil pickups; three-way selector switch; two CTS pots (volume and tone); Telecaster circuit from 1953 to 1967 featured: neck with 'bass' preset /no tone (position 3); neck with tone (position 2); and bridge with tone (position 1)

6. BODY
Solid ash (alder standard); single-cutaway; three-tone sunburst nitrocellulose finish (wider than standard); bound top and back

7. NECK
Bolt-on; one-piece maple; walnut 'skunk stripe'; slab rosewood fretboard; 21 frets; 'clay' dot markers; nitrocellulose clearcoat finish; dated '10/58' (Oct 1958)

With thanks to ATB Guitars
www.atbguitars.com

GUITAR PHOTO BY JOBY SESSIONS

David Davidson's Vintage Icons

This highly sought-after pre-war Dreadnought features a rare sunburst finish

1936 'Shaded Top' Martin D-18

Pre-war D-18s feature ebony fingerboards and bridges. This changed to rosewood in 1946

"This is a 1936 Martin D-18 with a shaded top – probably the cleanest one in the world. Shipping records show they shipped two shaded top guitars in '36. The Martin ledger goes all the way back to before the American Civil War, which is pretty amazing. It's possible that not all 'dark tops', as they were referred to in the Martin catalogue, were recorded being shipped as such, and some collectors estimate the figures to be higher. Even so, there aren't many out there.

"In my mind, this is the pinnacle of a great-sounding Martin. Purists will sing the praises of 30s Martins, but I've had a lot from the 40s and 50s that sound great as well. The look of this guitar is beyond belief, but it sounds incredible, too. I don't do as much with acoustic guitars as I do electrics, but I'm pretty familiar with them and I can tell you that when it comes to these pre-war Martins, they're very desirable. Even during the recession from 2008 to 2012, they never seemed to lose a dime. While electric guitars were struggling, acoustics were generally doing well. This one happens to be a really amazing piece, and it has all the good things people look for, including forward-shifted, scalloped X-bracing.

"The sunburst on a Martin is unique. It looks different to the sunburst on a Gibson flat-top. These guitars were made as a direct response to Gibson making sunburst flat-tops; they had a little competition going on. In fact, the whole thing is rooted in – often unspoken – competition. I'm sure they saw each other's products at the trade shows in the 1930s and, presumably, Martin thought they might be losing some market share if they didn't do a sunburst guitar. It's called a 'dark top' in the catalogue, although people tend to call it a shade top or shaded top.

"Gibson had their Jumbos, which are often called dreadnoughts, too, but these larger guitars aren't comfortable for every kind of guitarist. Alternatively, 000-sized Martins can fit a player's body better. Because of the way the guitar is shaped, it sits lower on your thigh, and the [lower bass bout] feels significantly smaller against the forearm. I think that's why the 000 guitars were so popular with female players and/or those of smaller stature. But the Dreadnought was made to be played standing up. It was made bigger and louder so that players back in the day – be it in a church group, an outdoor singalong or whatever – had a guitar that was able to project when standing. Nevertheless, a lot of players ended up playing them sat down.

> "This is probably the cleanest shaded top Martin D-18 in the world"

"You get more bottom-end with a [D-size] Dreadnought than you do a 000. There's not a dramatic difference between them, but I think there is a dramatic difference between a 000 and 00 or 0. There's significantly less low-end with the smaller 00 and 0; that's another reason why I think a lot of people prefer 000s. Not only do they fit better and are easier to play both sitting down and standing up, but the sound is rich and full. I mean, either is wonderful. An 18-series guitar is nowhere near the top of the line; it was one of the lower Martin guitar styles made at that time – the 28-series was considered the midline – and there wasn't a huge difference in price between a D-18 and 000-18. It was really about which was the more comfortable of the two.

"People like the 18s for recording, particularly fingerstyle. If you use an 18 – which is generally a brighter guitar than a 28 – for fingerstyle, it can balance out nicely. It can sound more subdued playing fingerstyle on a 28 because they're less bright, but they often sound better using a plectrum. A plectrum is going to make any guitar sound brighter than your fingers because it's a harder material. D-28s are associated with bluegrass, but you can use one to play just about anything. Same with a D-18. It really comes down to how you decide to play them. Dreadnoughts can be bigger and boomier if you strum them a certain way. You can get a lot out of them if you want it. Or they can be very subtle when gently picked.

"I've rarely come across an early Martin Dreadnought I didn't like. The only times they've not been that great have been when there were tons of repairs – too many cleats stopping the good vibrations of the soundboard. But they can be treacherous to own, especially in cold, dry climates. That's when you really have to give them a lot of care and feeding. The only guitars I've seen that seem to do well in virtually all climates are made of maple. Maple rarely cracks." **[RB]**

Vintage guitar veteran David Davidson owns Well Strung Guitars in Farmingdale, New York
www.wellstrungguitars.com / info@wellstrungguitars.com / 001 (516) 221-0563

This 1936 D-18 was originally priced at $65. "Dark top on special order at no extra charge," reads the catalogue

PHOTOS BY PAIGE DAVIDSON

Blues Headlines

Richard Barrett is on a mission to make you a better blues player – with full audio examples and backing tracks

Matt Schofield

Tutor Richard Barrett | **Gear used** Knaggs Choptank, Boss Keeley SD-1, Vox AC15 C1
Difficulty ★★★★★ | 20 mins per example

AS BLUES GUITAR EVOLVES over the decades, different influences filter in and undoubtedly techniques progress and tones refine. But certain elements always remain, as listening to a few of the current generation of players such as Oz Noy and Philip Sayce will demonstrate. This issue, I've chosen to model the solo (approximately) on the style of another modern blues player, Matt Schofield, particularly his rendition of Elmore James's *Stranger Blues*.

The rhumba beat gives a lively rhythm section to play over and the major chords in the backing encourage a few steps outside the straight pentatonic, such as some 6ths. There's also plenty of the all-important blues/quarter-tone bends to give it some attitude – and straddle the gap between major and minor harmony that is such a key element in this type of blues.

Because 12 bars flies past so quickly at this tempo, I've gone ahead and taken a second 'chorus', the first of which is transcribed in full, but for reasons of space I've cherry-picked highlights from the second half. This means there are four bars that aren't transcribed, but if you check out the accompanying video, then you'll see it's pretty easy to work these out – as well as a good exercise to do so!

As a general rule, the solo is based around the various shapes of the D minor pentatonic, but taking care to give any F naturals a little push sharp. This doesn't need to reach a perfect F#, you just need to hear that this isn't a minor 3rd any more... Moving to the IV chord (G), I've stated the major 3rd (B) a few times, which becomes the 6th when back over the home chord of D. Check out the examples and solo, and I hope this gives you a few useful ideas! See you next time.

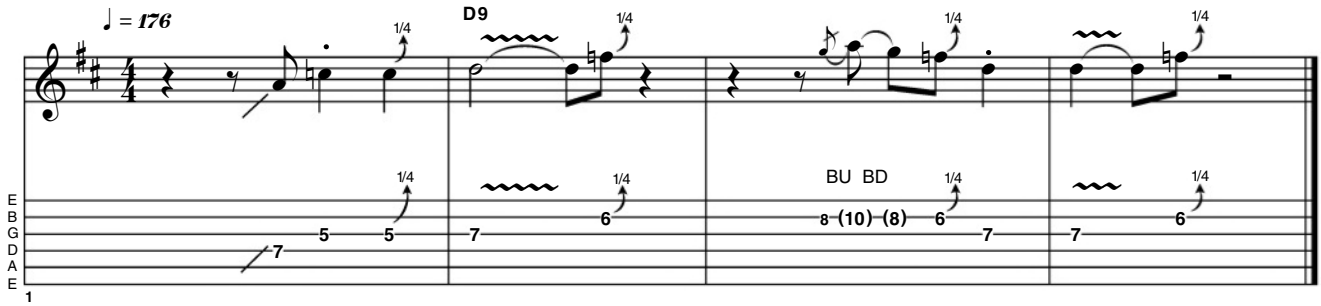
Richard Barrett's album, *Colours*, (complete with backing tracks), is available now from ***www.richardbarrettguitar.com***

Richard uses a rhumba beat in his emulation of Matt Schofield

PHOTO BY JOSPEH BRANSTON

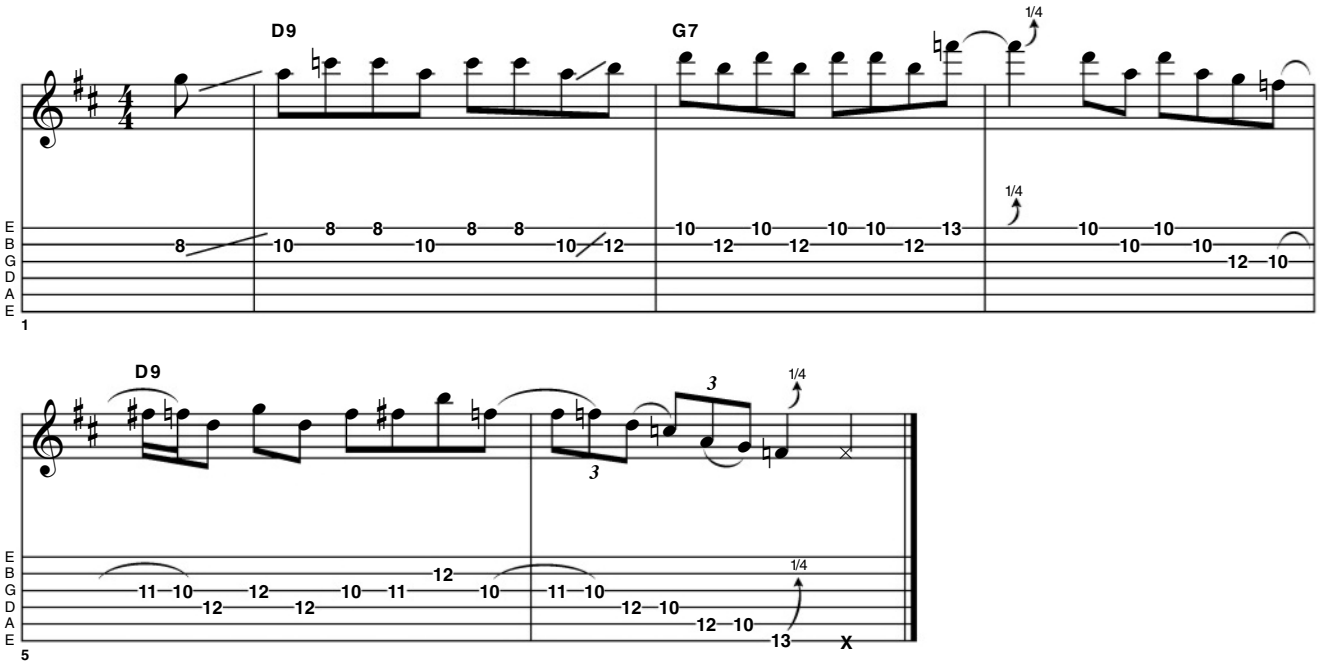
Example 1

I'M LOOKING AT THIS PHRASE as based around a fragment of the D minor pentatonic, shape 4. Watch for the F naturals and push them a little sharp – this doesn't literally need to be a quarter or semitone, just make sure you can hear that little lift, and how it gives the whole thing much more attitude. As an aside, you'll see the second C in the pickup bar does a similar thing.



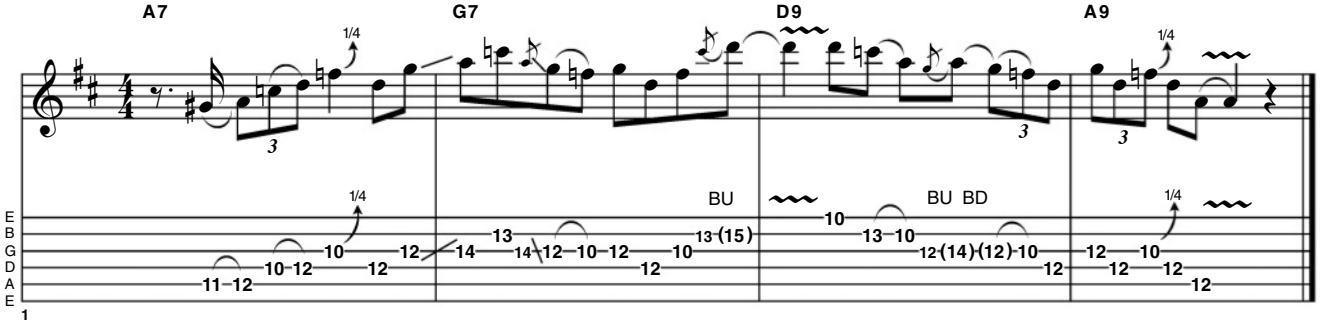
Example 2

THE FIRST BAR HERE could be viewed as a fragment of shape 5 from the D minor pentatonic. This motif then slides up for the IV chord (G), giving the major 3rd and 5th, a classic blues move. Staying in this position into bar 3, you'll see how neatly it segues into shape 1 of that same D minor pentatonic. Notice there are a couple of hammer-ons between F natural and F#, which give a similar major/minor ambiguity as the quarter-tone bends, plus a cheeky 6th (B).



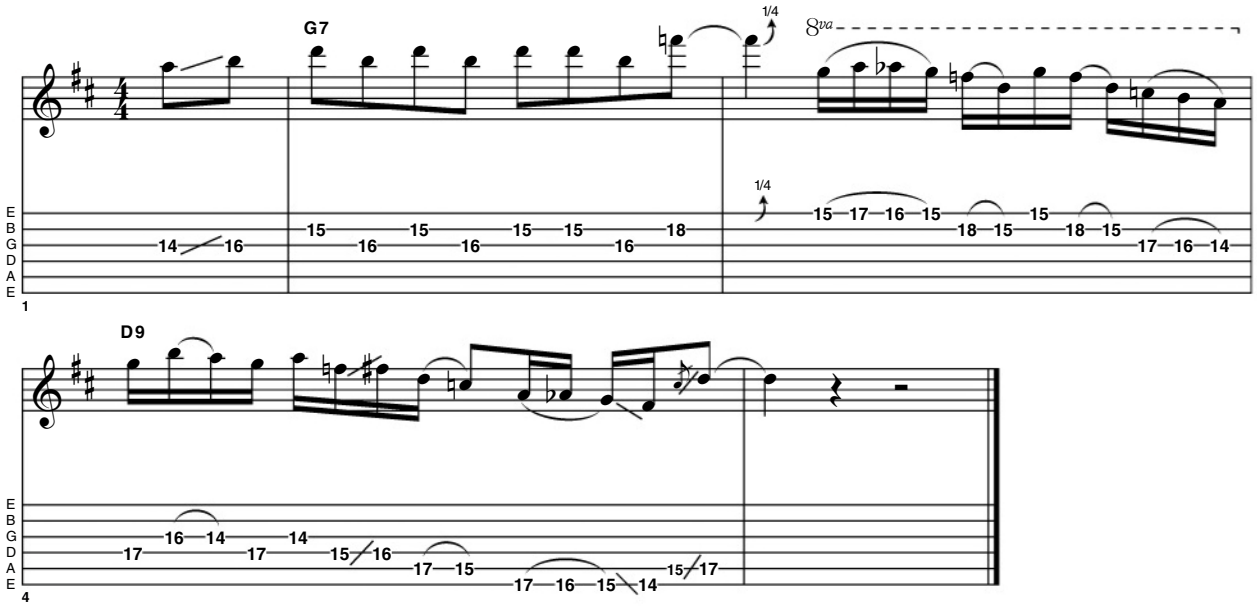
Example 3

FOR THIS LAST THIRD of the first 12 bars, we head for the V (A), IV (G), and I (D) chords. I'm staying mostly with the shape 1 D minor pentatonic, apart from a brief slide in bar 2, which you could say is a momentary change to shape 2. I'm maintaining an awareness of the chords as they go by, but at this speed you can take some liberties. Who would have thought I'd get away with that slightly sharp F over the A7 chord?



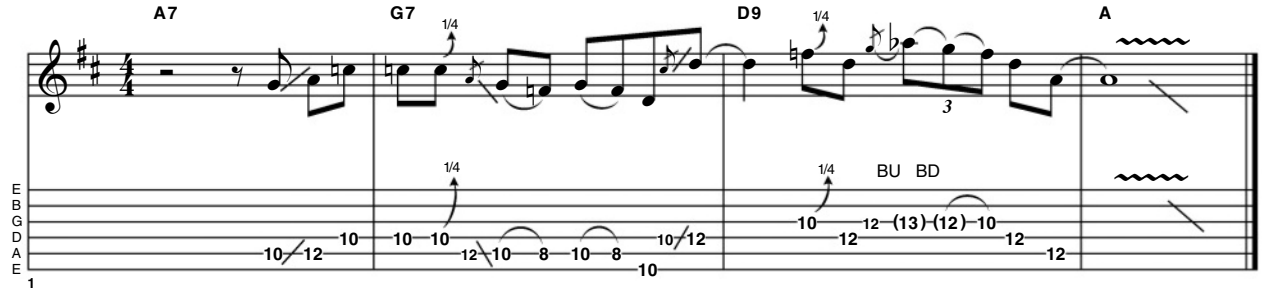
Example 4

AFTER THE FOUR UNTRANSCRIBED BARS (which are pretty easy to work out), I'm recycling an idea from Example 2 here in bar 1 but in a different position, which I'm viewing as based around shape 3 of the D minor pentatonic. The quick legato phrase that follows stays around this same shape but fills in a few extra notes: a 6th (B) and the slide from F to F#, or from minor to major! The phrase finishes with a chromatic run on the sixth string – this will take a little work, but it is a really useful lick.



Example 5

THE CLOSING PHRASE uses more of those slides between D minor pentatonic shapes; you could view the first two bars as sliding between shapes 5 and 1 – with a little ♭5 at the very start! We land on shape 1 for the very final phrase. I have 'quantized' the last two beats of bar 3 to make them easier to read (and write!), but you'll hear it drops behind the beat a little just before landing on the final A. Unintentionally, but it fits well with the feel.



Hear It Here

MATT SCHOFIELD
HEADS, TAILS & ACES

Matt is a master at adding jazzy flourishes while keeping an authentic blues feel. Check out his playing on *What I Wanna Hear*. It's also interesting to hear his take on a minor blues on *War We Wage*, with a few neat chromatic slides into phrases. You may also recognise a couple of the ideas in *Lay It Down* – a slow-tempo major blues with a couple of chord changes that could trip you up at first!

PHILIP SAYCE
PEACE MACHINE

Philip Sayce comes at his blues with a ferocious attack, not often heard this side of Gary Moore. Listen to *One Foot In The Grave* and *Powerful Thing* to hear his adrenaline-fuelled riffs and solos at their most in-your-face! On *Alchemy*, a more low-key minor blues, he shows a more sensitive side to his playing (though no less fiery), with a clear knowledge of where he can go outside of the standard pentatonic shapes.

OZ NOY
TWISTED BLUES VOL 2

Oz Noy's incredible facility on the fretboard goes way beyond mere 'chops'. He brings a jazz/country/blues feel to *Rhumba Tumba*, then a duet with Eric Johnson on *Ej's Blues* (see a chord chart before trying this...). Finally, *Just Groove Me* features a Hendrix-style funky rock riff that goes through a few tricky changes; his phrasing is a little like Steve Howe's playing on those frantic first few minutes of *Close To The Edge*.

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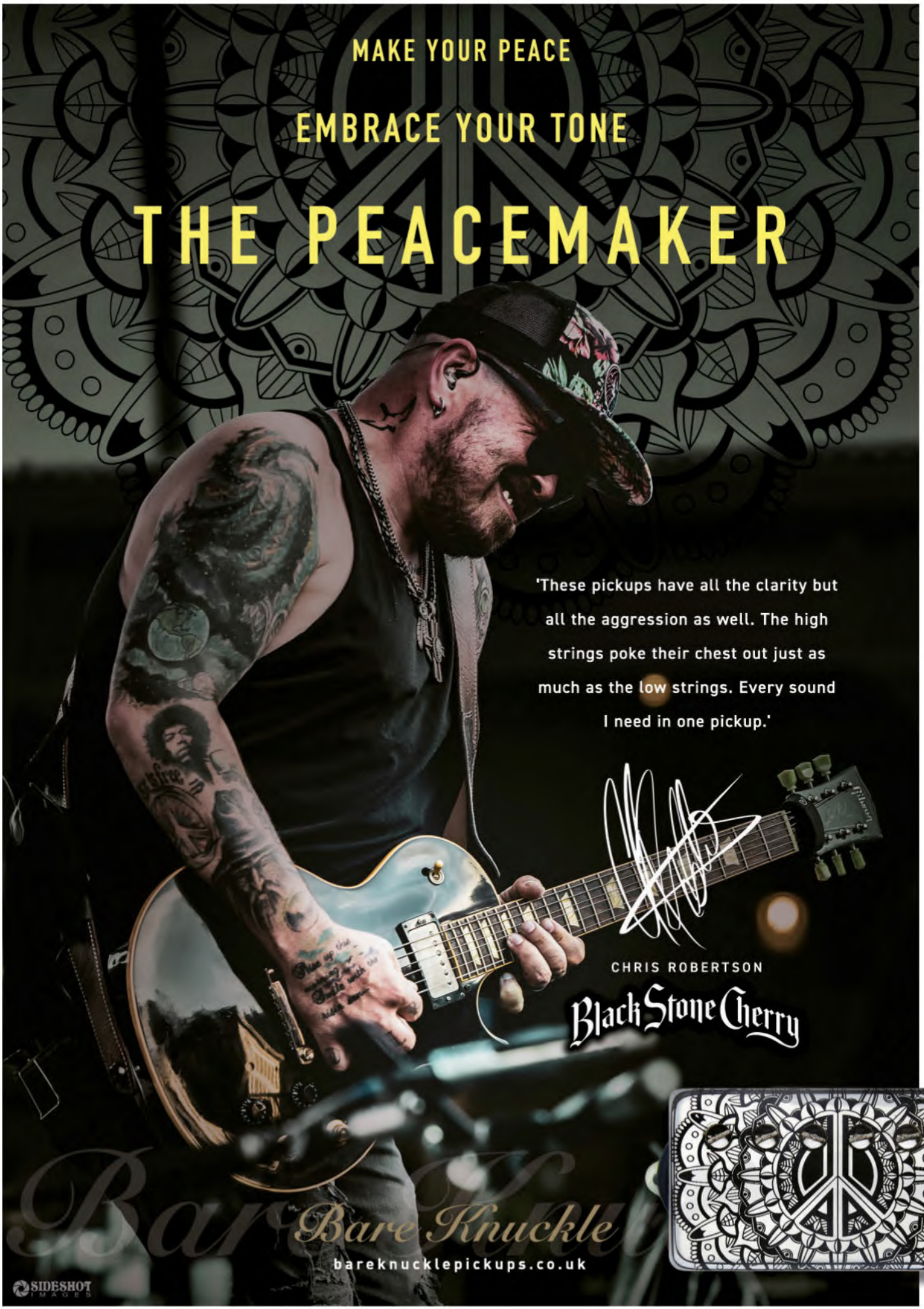
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